# SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES

A Nova Science Fiction Magazine

No. 23 2/6 VOLUME 4

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by JOHN KIPPAX

## ★ TRIAL ★

by NELSON SHERWOOD



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*Animal, vegetable or mineral, the court still had to decide whether the Zana had intelligence or not— either way the fate of a planet would be affected.*

# TRIAL

## by NELSON SHERWOOD

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### Chapter One

In the case of Terra versus Harrington Galactic Importers Ltd., it was common knowledge that if the defendant was found guilty the sentence must be life imprisonment with a skimpy and long delayed remittance for good behaviour. That knowledge was not what caused Bill Harrington to surge up from his wooden seat in the dock, angry, alarmed and ashamed of being ashamed.

The Attorney General had merely said, in his rich, fruity, firm voice : " Call Marie Rosslyn."

The name repeated itself in diminishing echo as the robots relayed the call to the witnesses' waiting rooms. A stir rippled in anticipatory counter-point around the anchovy-tight courtroom. Harrington forced himself to relax, to release his white-knuckled grip on the dock rail, to lower himself to the wooden seat, to slough from his mind the implications of this whole ghastly parody. He'd never dreamed they'd call Marie. He saw now how stupidly naive that belief had been.

The chief prosecution counsel was the Attorney General, Sir Hugh Louis-Gilliland, renowned for his powers of destructive cross-examination. Gilliland was unlikely to miss so simple a trick as calling Harrington's one-time secretary.

Secretary ! Marie had been more than a secretary to the young and struggling Harrington Galactic Importers Ltd. Bill Harrington used freely to admit that without Marie Rosslyn, HGI would never have got off the ground.

And now here she was being used as a chief prosecution witness.

She'd be a hostile witness, too.

Heads in the court were turned expectantly to the door through which Marie would walk. The tv cameras high in the roof turned beady telescopic eyes down. The high-domed building quietened down, breaths hushed, rustling of paper quietening. Outside now the sun was flooding down, filling the world with brightness and gaiety and laughter. Across the ornamental gardens in Capitol Park kids were skylarking, sailing model ships on the round pond, chasing one another, ragging. Nurses were supervising robot perambulators, and on-leave spacenavymen were eyeing the nurses. Air and ground traffic would be gliding smoothly and noiselessly along the avenues and boulevards. Life, out there, was going on as it had gone on for ten thousand years.

Inside, life was running out for Bill Harrington ; the very word coming to have a nasty, a final, meaning.

In the silence Harrington kept his head down and stared past his splayed knees to the floor. He didn't have the courage to look up and see Marie Rosslyn walk into the avid reception of the court ; but that feeling of inadequacy was for her, not for him. He wondered how she'd been keeping in the three months since he had last seen her.

The Terran worlds in the Galactic Federation of alien races had followed the preliminary hearings of the Harrington case with nominal interest ; but the eve-of-trial murder had acted as an alarm bell, bringing in reporters and tv hounds and setting up the whole trial as a first class item of entertainment for better than ten thousand planets.

So far the entertainment had dragged on for a complete day ; this was the morning of the second day. In his opening speech the Attorney General had demanded the full severity of the law's punishment for Bill Harrington. He had led his frame-work witnesses through their evidence-in-chief, and Laurence Weightman, Harrington's defence counsel, had had scarcely half a dozen questions in cross-examination.

What had been the use? Everyone knew that Bill Harrington had inherited a broken-down toy importing business and had through the medium of the Zana built it into the Federation's busiest and up-and-coming wealthiest.

That thought brought Harrington's head up to stare at the exhibits table flanking the open space between judge, jury and counsel. The toys on the table tossed a paint box of colour into the sombre courtroom, where the deep reds of gown and curtains, the glitter of gilt engraving, the whiteness of nylon wigs all seemed overlaid with the stultifying dust of time.

Just that one glimpse he caught of the toys—and thought of Marie was swept away and he saw, with the minute clarity of a reversed telescope, the grey walls of his uncle's broken-down toy warehouse huddled against the monorail skirting the space-port. He saw himself, young and trim in space-navy whites, paying off the cabbie and turning to regard the intimidating thing he had inherited. He could remember with an ache of affection the way the sunshine had fallen on his back, warming him, bracing him for the coming interview with the lawyers. Fresh from space he'd been then, back home on Earth on leave after three years aboard *Cougar*, heavy cruiser, patrolling the extended starlanes beyond the sway of Terra.

That remembered shiver of pleasure at good clean sunshine had taken him into the dilapidated building, past piles of broken and discarded packing cases, mounds of rusting metal, scraps of paper greying and rotting in every corner, brought him up the creaking stairs to the office with its misty cobwebbed windows overlooking the monorail.

His first glance, then, had been for the untidy heap of gaudy toys piled against one wall.

His uncle's solicitor, Matthew Barnfield, smiling, bent, shrewd with years of listening to other people's troubles, had greeted him kindly and waved him to a seat. Jonathan Travers, the manager, had not risen from his desk as Harrington entered and he did not offer to shake hands.

Barnfield said: "We asked you to come here, Mr. Harrington so that you might form a true estimate of the estate. Your uncle lived here, you know. There is no house, nothing apart from this warehouse and what it contains."

Harrington sat down. " I hadn't seen my uncle in a number of years. I'm surprised he left everything to me."

" Only kin. Although you should not allow yourself to think there is a great—"

Barnfield was crudely cut off by Jonathan Travers. The manager affected black oily hair, a thin black moustache, and clothes that were sharp enough to split gee's. " It was criminal of Harrington to leave his estate to a green space-navy lieutenant ! Did he think of me ? Oh, no—"

Bill Harrington sorted some of the picture out, now. He remembered old uncle Sam Harrington, his father's younger brother, well enough. The old man had never married and liked to spend his time adding to his outstanding collection of alien lepidoptera. Harrington had brought the old boy bugs and flies and creepy-crawling horrors from various planets at which *Cougar* had let down. Sometimes there had been trouble over quarantine at immigration; but nearly everything had been allowed in—dead.

When Harrington's parents had died, quite peacefully, and he had been out in deep space, Sam Harrington had seen to all the formalities. Harrington had felt grateful to his uncle then. Perhaps this legacy meant nothing—the state of the warehouse was clear indication that lepidoptera had won out over toys—but it was in a very real sense a link in the family. This chiseller Travers could squeak all he liked ; nothing from Uncle Sam meant nothing from Harrington. And the bugs had all gone to the Terran Museum of Alien Natural History. The curators had gone green-eyed with jealousy at the collection.

Jonathan Travers helped himself to a cigarette after that outburst without offering one to the solicitor or Harrington. The manager's sleek overly-handsome face was betrayingly flushed and bright-eyed. Perhaps, Harrington guessed judicially, there had been a little hanky-panky with the firm's cash, something that might explain the run-down appearance. Uncle Sam had probably been too busy with his bugs to worry just so long as he received enough to live on, and buy more specimens.

" I have to report back for duty in a week," Harrington said carefully. " I suppose the best course would be to sell the business for what it will fetch—"

Travers began to say something ; but Barnfield chopped him off. He shook his head. " If you sell out, Mr. Harrington, you'll receive a fraction of what the business is really worth. The main credits lie in the contacts with alien businessmen."

" Goodwill ? I understand. What do you suggest, then ?"

Barnfield glanced at Travers. Harrington caught the implication. If Travers had been a competent, an honest, a normal manager then the solicitor would have been happy to have handed over that problem to him. As it was, there could be no truthful guidance from that quarter.

" Could you," Harrington said. " Is it possible to hold everything in suspense, deep-freeze the business, as it were, until I return from this next cruise ?"

Barnfield sucked his lower lip in. " Yes. I suppose we could do that. Mr. Travers discharged all the employees the day after your uncle died. There is nothing outstanding—"

" Oh ?" interrupted Harrington. " Why sack everyone ?"

Travers took the cigarette from his mouth. " There was no work for them. We filled the last orders a week before the old man died."

" All right. I don't know what you're going to do, Travers, about another job. But as of now you, too, are discharged and this company goes into the deep-freeze—"

" You can't do that !" Travers jumped up, his face diabolical. " You young puppy ! I'll—"

The scene went on for some time. At its close they had settled it Harrington's way.

He went back to *Cougar* chuckling over owning a broken-down old warehouse with a few mouldy toys stuffed away in store cupboards and a number of unspecified alien contacts. He'd compiled a list of these latter and he had an idea he'd look some up if space-navy duty took him in their direction.

Judging by their number, duty would.

Relations in space had been friendly around that time with no fresh alien races to be contacted and inspected and the first offerings of peaceful exchanges made. *Cougar* as a heavy cruiser sometimes copped solo assignments ; but now she was between long-range cruises, filling in crew-time by patrolling the Federation's starlanes, and so Harrington was able to follow up quite a number of his uncle's contacts.

What he found surprised and pleased him. The firm of Harrington Galactic Importers Ltd. had quite a name out in the galaxy. The best in toys from the Solar System demanded the very best in alien toys in exchange. Harrington found himself fascinated by the intricacies of alien psychology in devising gadgets to amuse little alien children.

He was reclining in a split-cane chair on Challinor under the lantern trees, idly watching swooping flocks of white, scarlet

and emerald dragon flies the size of sparrows flittering between the spouting jets of warm-water fountains when Lieutenant Bates found him. The dusk wrapped a blue gold mantle about the terrace where Harrington sat talking to wizened Krantor who exported those intricate puzzle boxes that sold for two hundred pounds apiece in Regent Street. The dusk was warmly scented and relaxing and Bates' words jarred.

" We have to report back to the ship on the double, Bill. Trouble on Terpsichore."

" There is always," said old Krantor softly, " trouble on that pestilential world."

" Terpsichore's a reasonable sort of place," Harrington said, heaving himself out of his chair and straightening his uniform.

" You have been there before ?" Krantor was surprised.

" Twice. Made a few friends, too, which amused me."

" That would not amuse me, my friend, nephew of my friend Sam. Not amuse me at all." And old Krantor pursed his alien lips and reached for the tinted wine at his elbow.

" Well, Bill, I haven't been there yet. But it looks as though I'm slated for that dubious honour immediately." Bates smiled his lop-sided smile. He was thin and wiry with lank straw-coloured hair and *Cougar* would have been deaf, dumb and blind without her electronics expert. Lieutenant Harry Bates came from a family of scientific wizards and Harry Bates often said that he was the moron of the family. Not having met any of the others, Harrington could only assume they were every man jack a genius. Now the two spacenavymen walked out of the terrace, calling their farewells to old Krantor, stepping into the ship flier that Bates had brought.

" Any idea what the trouble is, Harry ?"

" None, old fruit. None at all. But the skipper and Jimmy the One have been in a huddle in the skipper's space cabin for the last two hours. As soon as all hands are aboard we blast off."

" For Terpsichore."

" Yup. And for their protoplasmic horrors. Oh, sure, I've heard all about 'em. Great fun."

" Best advice anyone could have on Terpsichore, Harry," Harrington said seriously, " is to wear body armour at all times. That way you might stay alive and sane."

As the flier scudded for the spaceport and the waiting cruiser, Harrington began to think more clearly of Terpsichore. And as he thought the black fear grew to engulf him. Terpsichore was not going to be nice.

## Chapter Two

Terpsichore was not nice. Terpsichore was hell.

The pilot let *Cougar* down gently through the outer levels of radiation with the screen meters fluctuating wildly and the power drain on the engines sending the black squad into frenzies. This planet was the only one circling her parent sun and she swam in such a bath of radiation that van Allen belts appeared as the emission of a filament bulb in comparison. When *Cougar* finally touched down everyone sat a moment silently, getting their breath back, wiping away sweat.

She'd been brought down by the pilot at a navy-space field in the antarctic. Harrington could see a huddle of other navy and commercial ships around the perimeter. He went with the skipper and the landing force of officers and ratings to the central buildings where they would be briefed on the current situation. There was always trouble on Terpsichore.

The planet was hot. Here in the antarctic the weather was like June in Scotland. If Terpsichore could have been moved a few million miles further out from her primary she would in nearly all respects become another Earth ; as it was with the heat and the radiation overspill only the poles offered any comfort to Terrans.

" And," said Commissioner McGovern tiredly, " the arctic base has been almost obliterated by the growth. We've called in as many ships as we could contact quickly. Some are already up there blasting away, trying to save the arctic base."

" Unfortunately," put in his aide, Tsu Liang, gently, " the planet's growth thrives on radiation. If you turn any sort of radiation weapon on it you merely feed it. We have to clear it the hard way."

Of *Cougar's* officers half, including Lieutenant Bates, had not made planetfall previously on Terpsichore. For their benefit a brief rundown on the planet's growth was shown. Bates said softly : " Yoip !" The screen revealed a mass of green and yellow forest, dotted with colour, extending as far as the eye could reach.

" We have two camps about that," said Tsu Liang. " One camp believes that the rivers and seas breaking up the land mass are independently fed and that the resultant islands each contain their own flora. The other camp says that the growth covering the planet is one single tree."

The murmur of astonishment from the new men was broken into by Commissioner McGovern. " Certainly the growth can cross water. It throws out fleshy tendrils. We have found fossilized skeletons of fishy predators ; where the growth crosses water there are no predators left alive. The growth has conquered this planet millions of years ago."

" As you will readily understand," said Tsu Liang, " the extent of parasitism is fantastic. Vegetable, animal and in-between horrors proliferate. Parasites feeding on parasites. It is axiomatic that no one goes alone into the growth. And no one goes unarmoured and unarmed. Those are orders." He went on to sketch out the main races of semi-intelligent inhabitants, waging a ceaseless war for survival in the growth ; curious and infinitely pathetic little creatures living forever high above the unknown ground, scampering for life in the branches of the tree.

" We are here obviously enough for the vegetable oils and products that come by the ton weight. Our collectors are the Trapezana, friendly little folk who are the most intelligent race on Terpsichore, and who will do anything for us. We treat them kindly—and that in a literal and positive sense. Already their death rate has dropped and they don't live in perpetual fear." He showed on the screen an angled shot of a thick tree branch stemming from one of the myriads of trunks all inter-connected. A small four legged creature inched along the branch, his two arms holding a woven basket containing ripe fruits. Every now and then he stopped to pluck a fruit from a parastical vine and pop it into the basket.

In a blurry sequence of speed a flat sticky vegetable tongue licked out from a neighbour branch, struck at the Trapezanan. He ducked fast. The lashing tongue passed over his head, halted and flashed back.

" That's a tackymobile. Its mouth is maybe a thousand yards away. Nasty brutes."

The Trapezanan clung with his four clawed feet to the bark. His right hand flashed. The knife like a heavy machete cut through the swinging tackymobile, dropped the sticky tongue quivering, sent the severed vine looping away in blind recoil.

" Good for you, feller !" said Lieutenant Bates excitedly.

Then the alien calmly rolled up the amputated tongue, hitched it to his belt, and he went on his way plucking fruits.

The screen died. Commissioner McGovern said: "We supplied the machete. Their reflexes are fast; they have to be to stay alive. They're nice little folk. Help 'em all you can." Then he went into the details of the arctic base. "The growth and its spores and tendrils feed on radiation, as do many of the other parasites. So a charged fence won't stop them. *Cougar* and *Goeben* will join up with the force under Admiral Sir Khalifa Velasquez who is bombing and burning the perimeter trench back into being. When that is clear we can refill it with acids and poisons and the rest of the filth we use to halt the growth." He looked about the briefing room. "Any questions?"

There were none. The task was simple. Simple, that was, to describe. The toughness, the frightening enormity of carrying it out kept everyone aboard *Cougar* and *Goeben* and all the other ships of Velasquez's fleet perpetually at action stations for far too long. When at last Harrington managed to squeeze in two hours sleep he did not dream and awoke, it seemed, immediately afterwards to go back on duty to bash and bomb and blast at the growth and its insensate hungry tendrils. Gradually the spacemen carved the trench back into existence and then the army went ahead filling it with poisons guaranteed to kill at a touch any vegetable matter.

The guarantee wasn't always foolproof. This sort of emergency was always happening on Terpsichore.

The two poles were colder than the rest of the planet and yet they were warm enough to allow the growth to grow there even if more sluggishly. There were two enclaves where the men from earth lived. Ringed by poisons and by fire they offered refuge. From them the ships took off and landed.

Bates brought the latest news to Harrington as he was wearily cleaning himself up after that last long spell of duty. Bates looked just the same, inevitably.

"Hey, Billl! Guess what! We've been detailed to go see the native boys—"

"Oh, no," said Harrington. "That's made my visit."

"Cheer up. Adventurers out among the stars—that's us. Or didn't you know?"

"Join the space-navy and see the galaxy. Sure."

"We've to escort some scientist or other who wants to measure heads or make colour charts of the Trapezana. Might be fun. Just sitting up here blasting the growth is tiring—"

" You can say that again. I sometimes wonder why Homo sapiens ever paddled his big feet in the galaxy at all. It's all go."

" My boy," said Bates pontifically, striking an attitude. " Don't you realise that it is our manifest destiny ?"

Harrington threw a tape book at him and turned to climb into his armour.

They took the starboard number ten cutter and skimmed out over the growth. Doctor Syngman and his assistants were anxious to press ahead with their work now that the danger to the north polar base had been averted. Bates had a hard time keeping his eyes off one of the assistants. She was not beautiful in the accepted sense ; but the vitality, the love of life, the zest animating her face and her figure captivated far more than classical beauty ever could. She was a female animal and, it seemed, unaware or oblivious of that interesting fact.

At regular spacings over the growth the Terrans maintained flying platforms where cutters and fliers could land and where crews collected the offerings of the Trapezana and distributed payment. As a life it must rival a man's hovering descent to hell, Harrington considered, as his coxwain brought the cutter down on to the platform three hundred feet above the topmost lashing tendrils of the growth.

Doctor Syngman looked over the rail. The sun glinted off his bald head. Below, a metal framework lashed to the branches swayed slightly, and a group of Trapezana looked up, waving.

" It doesn't look very inviting," said Marie Rosslyn.

" The navy's here, Miss Rosslyn," said Bates lightly. " If you feel the slightest unease, just shout. We'll come arunning—"

" Yeah," Harrington couldn't help saying. " But which way ?"

Marie Rosslyn laughed. Harrington was aware of a strange sensation under his ribs, and he looked down quickly to where the Trapezana beckoned. Interesting girl.

Judy Swallow, the other girl member of Syngman's team, bustled up, her no nonsense face and straight black hair giving to Marie every advantage. " All set, Doctor."

Armoured faceplates clicked into position. They began to drop down to the platform with the good luck calls of the Terran crew of the flying platform ringing in over their outside pickup microphones.

Then those friendly voices were drowned as the arrogant stridulation of life in the growth rose up the scale. The whole tree moved with life. Harrington made sure his flame pistol was loose in the holster and his machete ready to hand. He'd been down into the growth just once before and he had never forgotten the experience.

Doctor Syngman turned out to be a singularly bloodless scientist, devoted to his speciality and absolutely blind to anything else. His team went to work with the willing Trapezana and Harrington had merely to ensure that his crew kept a vigilant look out. In the first hour, as they clambered down from the higher levels to the middle terraces where the Trapezana preferred to live, they blasted a grotesque miscellany of alien life forms all savagely bent on devouring Terrans and Trapezana. The heat was endurable only by reason of full-running refrigeration suits in the armour. Life, Harrington considered glumly, was going to be fun.

He had already taken the first step on the trail that was to bring him into the dock of the Central Criminal Court facing a charge the punishment for which was life imprisonment.

" Don't these people ever descend to the ground ?" asked Judy Swallow as they rested strung out along a branch. Hard eyes watched in every direction and twice a crewman picked off with his flame pistol a rearing flower-shaped maw that thrust in blindly but with scent-directed intention.

" That's a Sepalclamp," Bates said with a worried look at Marie Rosslyn. Harrington, observing the by-play, chuckled. Bates was a gonner, then, too.

" Glad you've been studying, Harry. Sepalclamps fix themselves by fibrous roots to the branches and send out wandering flower heads like that one, there "—he drew and fired, crisping the seeking horror—" which directly engulf and digest their prey." Then, to Judy : " No. I don't believe any Trapezana has gone down to the ground—willingly, that is—in thousands of years. And as to what is down there—your guess is as good as mine."

" Well," Doctor Syngman said mildly. " That's what we're here to find out."

Once, when Bill Harrington had been a tempestuous young boy living with his parents on the new Martian housing estate whilst his father, a consulting engineer, had been advising

on new air plants for the planet, he had wandered off with a friend and got himself thoroughly lost in the ochre dead sea basins. The contemplation of thirst had been for him since then a nightmare. He'd managed to get himself into trouble, too, when his father had been advising on the new Venusian planetary freightways. That time he'd stolen off and fallen into a hydroponics garden where he'd fought a brisk rear-guard action against pollenating insects before he'd attracted a farmer to hoist him out. That memory brought with it a distaste for any sprawling vegetation that extended above his head and oozed. Terrestrial trees were fine, clean limbed and graceful in the temperate zones ; here on Terpsichore descending through the growth he realised that he was having to face a concentration of basic fears.

Redcrown, the autocratic and hereditary chieftian of this Trapezana nation crossed his front legs in horror. He spoke in his perfect but softly slurred English. " It is not wise to descend to the great roots," he said. " No one returns who takes that journey."

" I'm as scared to go down as the next fellow," Harrington said. " But if the good doctor has to go down then I have to go, too—"

This puzzled Redcrown. " You fear to go down to the great roots, yet you are going." He reached across and slashed his machete across a cupsucker that was positioning itself to engulf Harrington's head. " This I do not understand."

" Simple enough, really." Harrington and the chief were standing on a branch a little apart from the others, who were busily checking over their equipment for the last time before the descent. " You have to do some things just because you are afraid, to prove to yourself that you're not."

" This is against nature." Redcrown was positive about that, engrossed in the argument ; but his eyes never ceased their vigilance and his Terran manufactured machete was ready to slash away creeping danger. " Fear was sent into the world to preserve men. Only through fear can you know where lies danger. As soon as you meet a situation where you feel fear then you retire at once. It is a warning."

" That's true enough," Harrington said, dangling his flame pistol. He would have said more, that the primitive sense of self-preservation manifested through fear had outlived its

usefulness now that men had developed weapons to combat the objects of their fear ; but thought of comparing a palaeolithic Terran's animal savagery with Redcrown's alien Trapezana suddenly struck him as rude and embarrassing. He said : " Sometimes there are deeds that must be done despite fear. Sometimes, because of it . . ."

" Hey, Bill !" That was Bates. " All set for the helter-skelter ?"

" Check." Harrington glanced down at the parasitic vines dropping away in coils of vivid green and blood red, sweeping in lines and streamers down into the dim depths, past the point where anything green grew. Down there leaves were white leprous horrors. The middle and upper terraces of the growth clothed themselves in resplendent green ; down by the great roots all was decay, slush and dank rottenness.

So they believed. With Doctor Syngman exhorting his team to be careful of their specimen jars, the party went down the vines to find out.

What happened down there beneath the growth, down by the great roots, Harrington was never afterwards absolutely sure.

It was not a nightmare because there had been nothing in his experience to create these fancies ; he knew that later on the nightmares would strike/fed by what was happening now. They switched on their lamps and the vegetative life surged in a single fluid motion of horror to engulf that light.

" Switch off !" shouted Harrington, sweating and shaking. " The light is rich food for them—switch off !"

So they groped and clawed their way down, unreeling an artificial man-made-fibre rope ladder as they went. The vegetation found no sustenance in that rope ladder. Twice Harrington had to cut his way out of a sawtooth trap flower into which he had dropped. Unarmoured they'd all have been dead by now.

" All in the name of science," Bates grumbled to him.

" If he wants to descend again," Harrington said " he can damn well have another crew to protect him."

All the spacemen kept a watchful eye on the two girls. With complete equality for women in any sphere they cared to enter there was nothing incongruous about girls going down to the great roots in face of danger ; but men still persisted in harbouring chivalrous thoughts and looking after women at their own expense. Stupid, maybe ; but essentially Terran and understandable.

Just when he lost the others Harrington didn't know.

He could remember with horrid clarity balancing on a downward sweeping branch that probably turned into a root beneath the slush, and seeing dimness, writhing roots and lianas and not a single human being. He shouted and a cloud of tiny winged insects flittered up blindly. A thing like a sticky groundsheet rippled over them. They stuck and began to dissolve. The groundsheet moved on and he blasted it with his flame pistol. Raw flame was energy these monsters couldn't stomach.

But he was lost. He looked up. A greenish radiance sifted down. If he mounted he would at least regain contact with the Trapezana and life. Down here he was risking everything for nothing. But where were the others ?

He shouted again. His radio was dead. Static was bad enough at any time for the little suit sets on Terpsichore ; now the hush was even more menacing. There was nothing for it but to climb the vines—the ladder was anywhere except in view. Guilt over his complete failure as the leader of his crew to protect Doctor Syngman blackened his thoughts ; hell ! the skipper would have something to say about this.

Seizing a vine he began to mount. The vine grew a clump of fanged tendrils that slashed senselessly at his armour. He ran his gauntletted fingers down the stem and ripped away the leeching hairs. If he could find the ladder he could descend again, regain contact with the party of Terrans.

He could remember clawing his way up. He could remember the vegetable things that sought ferociously to drag him down. He could remember with lightning-burst clarity sight of the two small Trapezana huddled on a branch, hand in hand. Pitifully small they looked. The boy Trapezana was holding the girl Trapezana firmly with his left hand, his right was flailing about with a stick, trying to beat off the vegetable and insect beings writhing about the lonely pair.

Harrington flamed his pistol. He could remember the sight of crisping bodies falling, of vines recoiling, of fanged jaws six feet across slumping slackly as his pistol charred away vegetable sinews. He could remember bringing his machete down with disgusted ferocity, clearing away the blasphemous things that slobbered and clawed to get at the children. But after that his

memory grew hazy; patches of remembrance throwing stark pictures before his eyes, scenes and visions he did well to forget.

Only later, when he pulled the two Trapezana children over the metal rail of the tree-platform, was the extent of his luck apparent. The fault in his armour that had wrecked his radio and also, devilishly, ruined his orientation equipment and got him lost, was more extensive than any man could hope to survive. For the last hundred vertical yards he had been virtually without armour protection. He fell over the rail and was vaguely aware of alien hands gently helping him.

## Chapter Three

The two children, crying, and yet, like children the galaxy over, already proud of their exploit, ran to Redcrown and his wife. They were gathered up, sobbing. Harrington felt the prick of a needle and then nothing until he woke up aboard *Cougar's* sick bay.

The doc stared down severely at him.

" Bill, you ought to be dead. Stone cold dead."

Harrington could feel nothing of his body. " I'm not, though, doc. You and I aren't going to the same place."

" Hah. Hark at the man. Harry ! He's conscious—or as conscious as he ever is."

Bates walked into the sick-bay with a sickly expression on his lean face. " How do you feel now, Bill ?"

The doctor shook his head. " He can't feel a thing. He's so full of dope the customs and excise would impound him for a year."

" I'm fine, Harry," Harrington said because he believed it. " Well—tell me. What happened ?"

" You're a ruddy hero, for a start. The Trapezana had given up the kids for lost. They're Redcrown's son and daughter, high muck-a-mucks. The boy will be chief in time—"

" What were they doing down there ?"

" They'd fallen. It happens. Anyone who falls past the middle terraces into the dankness of the great roots is given up for lost. No one goes after them. When you came back with the kids—well—"

" You were there ? I thought you were down—"

" When we lost you we returned up the ladder. We were worried. D'you realise how long you were down there ? We

looked all over and were getting more and more frantic when you showed up shredded to pieces—" Bates paused as the doctor shook his head quickly. Harrington saw.

" So I'm a hero to the Trapezana. I can understand that. Redcrown said they obeyed the dictates of fear. But, doc, what's the matter with me ? Why the dope ? What—?"

" Do you remember much of what happened ?"

" Not much. Just heat and choking and shoving those kids along and flaming the old pistol—although I lost that somewhere along the way. Machete—vegetable horrors—"

" Don't try to remember too much. You had a rough time. We had to amputate—"

Harrington could feel nothing of his body. And all the flippancy had drained out of him. He lay shrunken and wizened and waited for the doctor to tell him.

" Only your left leg—you were lucky. We're already building a prosthetic limb and some folk swéar they are better than the natural article—"

" But—?"

" But I'm afraid it means you're washed up as a space-navy man, Bill. Sorry."

The shock had been sharp, brutal ; but that was the way they did things in the service. Harrington's artificial left leg was not, in the nature of things, as good as his amputated one ; but it caused him little inconvenience and he argued passionately that his efficiency as a spaceman was not impaired. " In peacetime, no," he was told. " Comes a war, and we'll probably call on you faster than you expect. Sorry, lieutenant. Sorry."

Well, there was the toy business. That decrepit organisation of a broken-down warehouse, a few cupboards of tattered toys and a list of alien contacts bulked more and more in Harrington's thoughts. He needed an anchor to hold him down now that his vocation had been shattered. If he was not to be blown away with his hopes then he had to have an interest that would buoy him, keep him sane and happy. And toys it was going to be.

He went out to see Redcrown and his children and say goodbye. The Trapezana put on a royal performance for his benefit, at which he was the star and the honoured guest. After the banquet, bloated and strangely satisfied, Harrington sat with Redcrown under a leafy bower, well guarded, and smoked Terran cigarettes. He'd brought a thousand as a farewell gift.

" We are truly sorry about your leg, Bill," Redcrown said in his slurred English. " It would not be so bad for one of us. We have four ; you have only two."

" Truè, Redcrown, true." He hoisted his uniform pants leg. " But this'n is a beauty. Does all the tricks."

Redcrown was politely interested. Then the two children burst in, laughing and happy to see their hero, and there could be no more dark thoughts. Harrington felt an overpowering affection for them. They were grand kids.

When he told them that he couldn't stay long and that he was going back to Earth they were disappointed. When he told them he was to become a dealer in toys their interest sky-rocketted. In the ecology and culture-level of the Trapezana, toys were a vaguely heard of luxury. The kids played with knives, beating off vegetable monsters.

The ensuing conversation laid the foundations for all the successful operations of HGI that followed, gave Harrington a breath-taking goal, gave, into the bargain, untold pleasure to children throughout the Terran populated portion of the galaxy—and led to Harrington's appearance as a tired and disillusioned man in the dock of the Central Criminal Court on Earth.

Invalided out of the service he spaced back to Earth and went eagerly into business, to be joined within two years by ex-lieutenant Harry Bates, also invalided out as a result of an accident on a half-tamed frontier planet. Only when Marie Rosslyn joined the company and the triumvirate was able to expand on all fronts was Harrington finally assured that the business left him by Uncle Sam would prosper, that the dream was capable of fruition in reality.

Their agent on Terpsichore had to be chosen with the utmost care, and Bates spent a deal of time there himself. For Terpsichore, and the gifts of Redcrown, represented the final basis of power in the rapidly growing company of Harrington Galactic Importers Ltd. Without the Zana the products of HGI would not be easily differentiated from those of a hundred other toy companies.

And the Trapezana under the direction of Redcrown now and in the forseeable future of his son would deal only with Bill Harrington and his representatives. No other companies need apply. As a secret it didn't even have to be kept by its very nature it kept itself.

The future, then, looked rosily prosperous for Bill Harrington. The company manufactured toys, moved their particular brand of Zana magic on them, and then sold them to the highest on the waiting lists. The old warehouse was torn down and replaced by a slab-sided but beautiful modern building. A busy and enthusiastic staff worked in ideal surroundings. The various bank managers, where HGI maintained accounts in different banks and various planets, uniformly doffed their hats and laid down their alien brand of red carpet when Harrington or his representatives visited them. Life, then, was very good.

Then Harrington's secretary announced Julius Green and life shifted, suddenly and sickeningly, out of focus.

After Julius Green's first call on Harrington in the new modern building down by the monorail tracks, Bill Harrington buzzed for his secretary and said : " Never let that man in here again."

He was blazingly angry. Yet, when he discussed the matter with Marie Rosslyn and Harry Bates, hastily summoned to an emergency conference, he began to see that perhaps emotion had been running away with him. After all, it wasn't as though the Zana were intelligent or had feelings or could suffer. But the whole idea advanced by Julius Green repelled Harrington, and Marie and Bates echoed those sentiments. As Marie said : " I couldn't tell Redcrown and that means I'd have a guilty conscience. So the idea must be wrong."

Matthew Barnfield, retained as the company solicitor, pointed out the obvious danger. " Julius Green is head of a very powerful industrial combine. He is used to having his own way. Just because you've said no, Bill, doesn't mean he's going to stop trying." The bent little solicitor pursed his lips. " I'd say we've got trouble."

They had.

A signal in businessman's code from Cottrell, Harrington's personal representative on Terpsichore, informed him that someone had been snooping around the Trapezana and Redcrown had been directly approached.

" Damn it all !" Harrington said, crumpling the decoded form in his hands. " Julius Green, of course. He'll try to find some other nation on some other continent of Terpsichore."

Marie Rosslyn shook her head. " I don't think that is very likely, Bill. The Zana seem to be peculiar to Redcrown's

country. At least, that's what I think. The growth there has a limiting as well as a colonising effect."

" I'd better get across there right away," said Harry Bates, standing up. " I don't want to have to get rough—"

" You'd better not. The law would be solidly with Green."

A few days after Bates arrived on Terpsichore Harrington had a call from Green. The tycoon's heavy, bored face with the evident signs of habitual authority deeply marking it, stared out calculatingly from Harrington's screen. He smothered his annoyance and said : " Yes, Green ? What is it ?"

" Like to have a little chat, Harrington. Purely—"

Harrington interrupted. The thought occurred to him that Green's face looked a cross between a turkey and a Herefordshire. " If it's about the subject of your visit here, then you're wasting breath." He did not add that Green's use of the word purely was highly comical.

" Maybe, Harrington. A social get-together is all I had in mind. For the moment."

Matthew Barnfield came in at that moment and made faces at Harrington. Finally, exasperated, Harrington said : " All right, Green. I'll come and see you in a purely social capacity." He cut the screen and said : " Well, there you are, Matthew. I've done as you wish and agreed to meet Green. Now what ?"

" Go and find out what his proposition is now, Bill. I smell a new attack—"

" He can attack all he damn well pleases. I *like* the Zana, Matthew !"

He took Marie with him when he week-ended at Julius Green's private luxury satellite orbiting between Mars and Jupiter around a wander-planetoid. There were a number of space-yachts already berthed and the party had moved into the frenzied gaiety of businessmen and their secretaries let off the chain. Harrington did not care for the goings-on overmuch ; but having made his decision he was anxious to press on and find out just what Green was up to. The man obviously thought he had a trump card.

Marie said after five hours' frolic : " Looks as though Green is giving us time to soften up."

" If he waits much longer I'll be asleep."

" That could be part of his plan, too, Bill." She wasn't altogether joking, either.

When at last Green sent a robot to call them to his private suite Harrington had to take a single pep pill to stop from openly yawning in the face of his host. Whatever he might think of the man and his policies, he thought more of his own possibly ludicrous ideas of good manners. Green waved them to seats. He did not rise when Marie entered. Harrington sat, fuming.

" Like to show you a film, Harrington," Green began sauvely. This man, Harrington knew, was a big-time, ruthless industrialist, with factories and plants on many planets, employing many workpeople, juggling with vast sums. He was incredibly rich ; but he wanted more. He believed in himself and his ramified organisations and he very evidently did not believe in the opposition he was encountering from Harrington and his relatively tiny toy business.

The screen flickered and then showed the interior of a factory. The camera panned, inclined down. Harrington realised he was being shown production of industrial components—they looked like the interiors of refrigerators—and the sheer size of the plant astonished him. Beside this HGI were very small beer indeed. The scene flickered. From the bays of semi-robots controlled by feed-back automation systems the picture now showed the same refrigerator components being manufactured—but—but . . .

Harrington sat up with an exclamation of sheer disbelief jolted out of him. At his side Marie gasped.

The screen showed a humming factory with a busy production line—and swarming over the machines, directing, working, manipulating, was a host of toys. Teddy bears, golliwogs, pink black and brown dolls, with eyes that remained open even when they bent down, pandas, cuddly toys and plastic toys, dolls of every shape and description, laboured over the machines of the factory floor.

Harrington's hands gripped up together and he could not look at Marie. The anger in him wrenched physically at his body, so that he had to jump up. " All right, Green. Switch the picture off. I can't stop your agents buying my toys ; but I can damn well stop you using them as slave labour."

" Sit down, Harrington," Green ordered brutally. " And keep quiet. I want to tell you what happened." The screen went dead. " There is more to that film yet."

Sitting down under the impact of Green's personality, Harrington caught a glimmering of why this man had achieved the power in the galaxy he wielded. Marie sat, quietly. There were three other men in the room, shadowy figures in deep armchairs. Green no doubt used them as pawns and as triggermen in his plans. He began speaking again.

" I sent a man to Terpsichore to do a deal direct with the natives there—I can offer all and more than you. But he was not successful—at least, not yet. So my scientists went at it the hard way. As you can see, they were successful." He paused and then said : " But not for long."

" We indoctrinate the Zana with simple little skills," Harrington said. " They may not be intelligent and they may even be more vegetable than animal—but we treat them with respect. I consider your plans—"

" Let me consider my plans myself, eh, Harrington ? Sure you give the Zana small skills." His voice was heavy with sarcasms. " Like when a little girl cuddles her teddy bear the Zana inside cuddles back. Like when she says in her mother-imitation voice : ' Now go to bye-byes, golly,' the Zana in the golliwog lies down and pretends to be asleep. Small skills. Pitiful little tricks in a galaxy ready to blow up at any minute."

" Maybe small and pitiful," Harrington argued back, nettled. " But clean and decent—"

" Don't make me laugh. What's unclean and indecent about turning out refrigerators and other consumer and luxury goods for people who want and need them ? What's so damn wrong about me and my business, Harrington ?"

" Using machines to turn out machines is okay. But the way you plan to use my toys—the way you showed me on that screen—is the same as chaining up the Zana and making them slaves !"

" Rubbish ! The Zana aren't intelligent. They aren't *people* !"

Green was sincere in what he was saying. Harrington could see that now. He hadn't taken enough notice of the industrialist as a man. " Here," Green said savagely. " Look at this." He jerked a finger.

One of the men in deep chairs pushed a box forward, opening the lid. Inside, looking like a withered branch torn from an ivy plant, with a central stem and many branching vines looping and coiled, lay a Zana. It was a big one.

Harrington through his revulsion and sorrow and pity for the withered dead thing, felt a surprise that they should grow so large.

" Look at it !" said Green in his bludgeoning voice. " A plant, a parasite, that infests the jungles on Terpsichore. And clever clever Mister Harrington gets sole concessionaire rights to import it and let it parasite inside his cuddly toys. It feeds on radiation, so it won't starve. Not unless you shut it away in a lead box. It has enough of a nervous system with ganglia and synapses to match to respond to the empathic thought processes—if they are strong enough. And children notoriously have strong feelings. So all you do is to run it through a set of movements and tie those in with the way a child feels, and sell them by the million." He thumped the lid of the box. " A sweet racket !"

" The Zana may not be people," Harrington said stubbornly. " But they're alive."

" Yeah. And streptococci are alive, too."

The man who had brought the box said thoughtfully : "What intrigues me is why the Zana are parasites on the growth when they feed on radiation. What's the point ?"

" That doesn't matter," Green said. " You attend to your jobs." He stopped speaking and Harrington caught the feeling of frustrated anger in the man. His scientists had not been getting very far, seemingly. Only—only there was that film.

" You've evidently managed to train some to run your factory for you. Classical sweated labour. That's a sweet racket, if you like."

" Show the rest of the film," ordered Green.

The film made Harrington sit back and let out a great sigh of relief. He laughed openly at Green. For the film showed a change in the Zana-controlled toys. They stopped their methodical work, gradually, jerkily, began to nod their heads, lie down and pretend to sleep, dance and pirouette, stand on their heads, cuddle up to some of the few human foremen, do all the childish tricks that Harrington taught them before selling them to happy children.

" Laugh, damn you," growled Green. " It's very funny."

" The factory indoctrination wouldn't take," said the scientist. As a remark it was as unnecessary as a remark could ever be.

Marie spoke, her clear voice cutting into the heated air of the argument. " But I don't see why you need to use our Zana toys for this sort of work. Surely automation takes care of that production just as well if not better ?"

Green breathed out heavily. " Apart from the matter of rapid adaptibility, flexibility, how much do you charge for one of those teddy bears, a small one, say ?"

Marie said at once : " Ten pounds."

" And a robot device to do the same job costs me ten thousand. Plus inspection and maintenance and repair. See?"

" For a few thousand pounds," the scientist said, " we could equip a factory with Zana workers that would cost us for normal automation and robot production many millions."

" Suppose," said Harrington, " just suppose I said I'd sell you Zana ready for indoctrination for the same price as you'd have to pay for automatics—?"

" I'd accept," growled Green.

" No maintenance and great flexibility," added the scientist.

" No deal," Harrington said at once, angrily.

" Look, Harrington," Green said in a smooth, coaxing voice that spoke of sweet reason. " Just why can't you see your way to importing Zana ready for indoctrination as workers ? So they're alive. But only just. They're vegetable parasites living indefinitely on radiation, with a very crude animal-type neural system that enables them to respond with strong empathy to human feelings. So okay, they're perfect for toys. The kids love 'em. My own youngsters have a nursery full. But they are very definitely not anywhere near the category of intelligent aliens. The law forbids us, and rightly, to exploit strange forms of alien intelligent life for dubious ends. Very good. I've never touched the trade in my life."

" But you don't mind beginning now ?" interrupted Marie.

Green turned on her fighting to control his temper. " I am not, young lady. These vegetables aren't in a position to be exploited. My God ! If you think what I want to do is wrong then isn't what you're doing equally bad ?"

" No !" Harrington said indignantly. Then, because he felt a shiver of doubt, he said : " Putting the Zana into toys and letting them react to children's wishes is a far cry from chaining the Zana up to factory production lines—"

" Is it ? How do you know what the Zana want ?" He smiled. Then : " And aren't the wishes of children notoriously cruel ?"

" As to the last," said Marie, " the Zana respond only to the empathic feelings we indoctrinate, and they are all on the loving level. The Zana cannot feel pain. They don't worry if a kid throws his toys down in a fit of temper."

Harrington said : " We know what the Zana don't want, and that is to work as slaves for you, Green."

" Slaves !" exploded Green. " Slaves ! Why all this talk of slavery ? Do I call you a murderer when you cut up a cabbage for your dinner ? When you trim a hedge to suit your requirements are you maiming something that cares ? These damn Zana are vegetables with an uncanny knack of responding physically to strong empathic thoughts. I don't follow your line of reasoning at all, Harrington."

" Well, let's just say that the quantities I can import are barely sufficient for my needs. There is none to spare for you. Sorry."

" And do you consider that gimmicking up kids' toys is more important than running factories more efficiently for the people of the galaxy ?"

Marie answered. " Yes," she said, finally.

" I give up." Green swung around pettishly and seized a drink proferred by a ready robot. He gazed morosely at the steel and plastic machine. " That clever feller cost me two hundred thousand. If I could adapt the shell and put a Zana in, how much ? A couple of hundred ? If that." He finished the drink and tossed the glass away. He looked very sorry for himself.

Harrington admired the act.

That act was maintained at full pressure for the rest of the time Marie and Harrington remained on Green's pleasure satellite. Despite his acknowledgment that what Green had to say about slavery and the attributes of the Zana was very probably impeccable logic, Harrington couldn't overcome his positive feelings that the course he was pursuing was the right and only one. Like Marie, he thought of what Redcrown's reactions would be. The Zana might be only vegetable parasites ; but to Redcrown they were a vital source of much of his wordly goods and because of that he and the Trapezana tended to personalise them. Harrington did not know the full life cycle or story of the Zana ; but he could vividly remember sitting under Redcrown's leafy arbour shade and seeing them for the first time, creeping in endless rows seeking a resting

place on the growth. Just because there were so many of them there on Terpsichore was again no reason to accede to Julius Green's requests.

Redcrown traded the Zana to Harrington because there was a bond between human and alien ; Redcrown had no such bond with the agents of Green. Leaving the pleasure satellite the next day, Harrington found with annoyed amusement that he was beginning to fret over his reading of the situation. Perhaps Green was right, after all ?

Perhaps these vegetable parasites with their weird alien tricks should be chained up to single tasks in vast modern factory plants ? What possible difference could it make to them ? Yet, possibly because he could not put a finger directly on any openly visible reason, he was all the more determined not to yield to Green. He also trusted Marie's feelings. It wasn't a matter of logic. It was a matter of conscience.

## Chapter Four

From the day of his return from that fruitless meeting with Green, Harrington dated the difficulties that beset HGI. From being a smart and comfortable little company specialising in toys and going places in the galaxy, the company declined into a fretful group of people wondering why trade, although brisk, should benefit them so little. Procurement of raw materials with which to manufacture the dolls grew difficult. They had to pay long prices to sellers who could find little to say in extenuation. Switching of contacts did not help. Freight charges soared.

When there occurred a mysterious fire in the warehouse, destroying a month's production of pandas—a good line—Harrington called a conference of the top executives. Marie, Bates and Barnfield attended, along with Eloff Khama, the genial private investigator Harrington had employed to ferret into cases. The report made gloomy reading.

" Sabotage, without doubt," Eloff Khama said in his bouncy way. " Easy enough to trace. But not, I fancy, easy to stop again. I'll see about a change of watchmen, if you wish."

" It's not so much the financial damage," Barnfield said, tapping his briefcase, " Insurance cover was adequate. But production has been set back—"

" And," said Harrington savagely, " we lost a lot of Zana." He snapped his pencil down on the mahogany desk. " Think of it. Those plants brought all the way from Terpsichore, after they'd been laboriously collected by Redcrown and his Trapezana. Brought across the gulfs of the light years, tended and cared for, carefully placed in those dolls—and then all destroyed. Burned. Y'know," he said, swinging round to glare full at Khama, " that's as near to murder as—"

" Oh, really, Bill !" Eloff Khama was an old friend of Bates and fitted into the group easily. " That's a bit steep. I mean —they're only vegetables, after all."

Marie bit her lip. Bates prodded his friend in the shoulder. " You were just a goddam marine, Eloff," he said witheringly. " You were never on Terpsichore. I reckon anyone who was doesn't look on the Zana as mere perambulating vegetables."

It was the old argument all over again. Harrington put a stop to it. " Tighten up on the security, Eloff. Now, what are we going to do about all these other pressures ? If Green keeps it up much longer he could bust us. People might queue up to buy their kids HGI wonder toys ; but if we can't produce them, what good is that ?"

The discussion produced—could produce—little in the way of an answer. Julius Green had now swung into an intensive campaign against HGI and although they might be able to sell their toys without trouble, Green had struck at a vital area. The resources he commanded made it inevitable that he would win.

" We ought to find out who his rivals are. They'd supply us reasonably." Bates was a subdued man these days.

" Yes," Marie said hotly, " and they'd want exactly the same as Green. I'd sooner go out of business than have those Zana chained up all day doing the same things over and over again like living robots."

Harrington couldn't stop himself from saying : " Well, that is only a little worse than a Zana which has a minor indoctrination. He can only do about a dozen different actions on empathic command—"

" Bill !" Marie was astonished. " If we only gave a Zana just one command and a child played with it doing just that one thing that would be infinitely better than having the same Zana working in a factory. Don't you see ?"

"Yes, Marie, you're right." But Harrington didn't look at her as he spoke.

Bill Harrington, managing director of HGI, had had to get down to some pretty basic thinking. As a private and personal company owned entirely by him, HGI was not susceptible to market scares; but Julius Green's pressure, unrelenting and persistent, increased to breaking point over the next few weeks. Marie maintained her intransigent attitude of preferring to be pushed out of business rather than allow the Zana to be pressed into serfdom. Harrington found himself making silly excuses to avoid her. The affaire that had been steadily ripening between them wilted.

He missed the tonic effect her vitality had on him. But he had to think this thing through without that sort of distraction as well as the sort provided by Green. Bates was sent back to Terpsichore to warn Redcrown and to thwart the agents of Green onplanet seeking the Zana.

After all, what were they but galvanic vegetables? They could not feel, they could not think, they had no emotions. Only by the freak of Terpsichorean growth and their parasitism had they become animated and responsive. They might as well be the bouganvillea perfuming the terraced wall of his country estate here in Italy on Earth. Fretfully, Harrington paced the flagstones in the warm Mediterranean night, looking up at the stars, worrying about Marie and about Green and trying to sort out the fate of perambulating vegetables. And the fate, too, of old Uncle Sam's business and the many men and women depending on Harrington's for a living.

People were more important than vegetables.

He consulted a solicitor the very next day, flying up to Naples, and despite his resolve feeling guilty over keeping this secret from Matthew Barnfield. The law was entirely explicit on the point. He found out all he wanted to know and flew direct to the Harrington offices, down by the monorail in an area that had miraculously become respectable as a consequence of the prosperity brought there by HGI.

Marie had flown across to an important contact in Australia and Harrington again had that dismaying feeling of relief that he would not have to seek to avoid her. He rang Julius Green on a scrambled line and after only ten minutes wait spoke to the great man.

The conversation was brief. " All right," Green said at the end, fatly complacent that events had gone the way he had always known they would. " I admit to knowing nothing of the economic sanctions you claim have been operating against your company ; but I imagine they will cease now. I'll let you have the cases at once. The Zana—"

" All I'm doing, Green, is to place unindoctrinated Zana in cases provided by you because our own production facilities have been so undermined we cannot handle the order for toys ourselves."

" Toys ?"

" We deal only in toys. We provide playthings for children, nothing more. Your cases will be filled with Zana in our usual procedure and the indoctrination of these toys will be your responsibility. My staff just cannot cope with the extra orders for toys."

" I'll see they're indoctrinated all right, Harrington." Green sounded more jubilant by the second. " If you like to regard it that way, okay. All I want are the Zana in my cases."

When that conversation was over Harrington rang up a number of leading toy distributors, asked them their opinions on the aptitudes the Zana-toys should possess, suggested he send along a batch unindoctrinated so that they should be filled with the ideas of the toy merchants. The scheme was eagerly seized on. Every toy merchant thought he knew exactly what children wanted. Harrington switched off the phone with a breath of relief and gave the necessary orders.

A week later, when everything had been done as planned, he looked up a number in the phone book, rang for an appointment.

That appointment he kept two days later, in a central city block of a hundred storeys. The receptionist smiled at him as he went in. She said : " The Public Prosecutor will see you now, Mr. Harrington."

So that was why he now found himself gripping the rail in the Central Criminal Court. Of course, there had been the eve-of-trial murder. A man called Jonathan Travers who had once been the manager of HGI tried to break into the offices and had been shot dead by one of Eloff Khama's guards. What he'd wanted there no one seemed to know. Harrington knew. He knew that Travers had been after the tape recordings of the conversation with Julius Green. And he also knew now that

Travers had been the brain behind the successful pressure against HGI. As the quondam manager he knew all the details of production and, with the grudge he owed Harrington, he had been in a splendid position to wreck the toy company.

But all that seemed of little moment beside this present agony. Marie. Marie Rosslyn had been called to give evidence against him. He found he could not continue looking past his splayed knees at the floor of the dock ; he had to raise his head and look at the door through which she walked. The splash of colour from the toys banked on the exhibits table held his attention for a moment ; then he looked fully at the door.

Marie walked in. She walked in quietly, composedly, head high. Her hands hung emptily by her sides. She, too, was suffering as Harrington was. She did not look at him as she entered the witness box and took the oath.

" Your name is Marie Rosslyn and you were the secretary of Harrington Galactic Importers ?"

" Yes."

The Attorney General seemed quite sure of himself, quite confident ; but Laurence Weightman, Harrington's counsel, leaned over to speak quickly to a subordinate. Harrington noticed that. Matthew Barnfield had got Weightman, promising him to be the best there was. Perhaps Weightman had spotted some flaw in the Attorney General's attitude ?

Marie gave her evidence in a firm but small voice, so that everyone hushed down even more to hear. She ran through the story of the re-founding of HGI and was frank about the Zana She was adamant that she had opposed their use as industrial slaves, and she also had to add that Harrington had been against that use right up until that last and disastrous business deal with Green. Her evidence, after all, could only confirm what the prosecuting counsel had been building up as a damning indictment.

" You returned from Australia, Miss Rosslyn. What did you find on your return ?"

" I was horrified to discover that Bill—Mr. Harrington, the accused—had agreed to sell Zana to Julius Green. They were undoctrinated and it was quite obvious that Green intended to use them—"

" Objection !" That was Green's lawyer, holding an active watching brief on behalf of his client, who was not appearing, was not charged—after all, Harrington was the

arch criminal—and who in any case was something like fifty light years away. " What the witness believes about what my client intended to do is not evidence."

" Objection sustained." The judge nodded. " Please go on, Sir Hugh."

Sir Hugh Louis-Gilliland grasped his robes. " As soon as you knew these Zana were to be sold to an industrial concern what did you do ?"

" I protested. I said that they could not be used as unpaid industrial slaves."

Green's lawyer fumed away but could find no objection.

The Attorney General made out his case, a strong and apparently loopholeless one. Harrington had sold Zana to an industrialist, deliberately unindoctrinated, so that they could be used in factories. Witnesses were called who proved beyond doubt that Green had so used the Zana.

The case against Harrington rested on his approval of the scheme, Green had so far escaped indictment on the grounds that he had merely bought a new tool and was quite unaware that it involved the slave use of intelligent aliens.

For Gilliland, a very astute Attorney General, had proved that the Zana were intelligent.

Harrington, Green's lawyers said coldly, had repeatedly assured the magnate that the Zana were not intelligent and could not be included in the laws proscribing the slave use of intelligent aliens. Business methods had to change to meet changing conditions in the galaxy. Julius Green was anxiously awaiting the verdict of this court, his man said, and meanwhile he had withdrawn the small pilot plant of Zana.

" And a bigger piece of humbug than that you couldn't find in a hundred parsecs," Harrington had growled when told.

Now Sir Hugh Louis-Gilliland went ahead with the aid of rushed-in experts from Terpsichore and proved that the Zana were intelligent. A screen was set up in the court and a film shown of the speeded-up life cycle of the Zana. Like everyone else, Harrington watched, fascinated. He, too, had not been fully aware of that fantastic piece of nature's living engineering.

Of course, it had been he who had suggested to the Director of Public Prosecutions that the Zana were intelligent. He'd had to do that to have the case brought to trial. He had since then more than once wondered if it was all worth it.

The screen showed Trapezana packing quiescent Zana into crates for despatch to Earth—to HGI and no one else. Then the strange perambulating vegetables were shown creeping along a branch of the growth. These Zana were of a size and shape with those used by HGI. They were looking in the search that might last decades, for a place to sink their roots. They needed a point on the growth which had already been in some way damaged so that an incision already existed in the tough bark ; they required some sunshine as distinct from other forms of radiation ; they required a nook where they were protected from the worst excesses of the other predatory flora. Finding a place in the overpopulated conditions of the growth was startlingly difficult.

A shot showed a Zana that had taken root in an angle of trunk and branch. Flowers grew. Flowers with a cup-shaped scarlet blossom with long uncurling sticky tongues, probing, reaching, seeking, scooping up tiny insects that ran and scuttled but were caught and imprisoned.

This was known to Harrington ; but sketchily, for he had never thus seen a planted Zana. He knew of the comparisons made with the terrestrial Lathraea. All the nourishment for the growth of the Zana did not come from the growth, then ; and this argued a survival factor unusual in such a totally dependent parasite. The oversize red blooms and the almost total absence of leaves were other indications of typical parasitism. There were parallels here with the terrestrial Loranthus. But from then on Zana went its own sweet way.

From the withering scarlet flowers clumps of thistle down floated free. There appeared to be thousands of them, wafting away on the fitful breezes between the writhing arms of the growth. Speeded up, the film traced the cycle of one of these free-floating stages of the Zana. It found a host simply by landing on the back of an insect and sticking there. Later it drifted free and took with it bacteria and viruses. From the resultant scrap of vegetable matter, impregnated with animal neurones, nourished by the floods of radiation falling on Terpsichore, the Zana grew. The next stage shown on the screen was that most familiar to Harrington ; the Zana about six inches in length, tough wiry vines without leaf or flower, that he had imported by the thousand.

There was good reason to suppose other stages in the development cycle of the Zana ; but here the main point had

been made. When the Zana was living in symbiosis with the insect host, it directed and instructed the insect. For these and only these Zana controlled insects could fly into the Zana flowers without danger. These and only these were permitted by the Zana to live.

That, submitted the Attorney General, argued intelligence.

Weightman sent a slip up to Harrington. " Our experts will deny this is intelligence. Instinct. Any comments ?"

Harrington replied : " No."

If it wasn't intelligent it was near enough to create an interesting argument. Added to it was the fact of the Zana's aptitude for receiving empathic feelings and of being capable of learning simple tasks. That, too, in Harrington's private belief was only instinct. But the two added together gave a cogent force to the prosecution's case.

There were opposing forces tugging away. Green needed desperately to have Harrington found not guilty ; for that would mean that the Zana were non-intelligent and therefore there could be no law against his using them in his factories. He had to keep himself aloof from the trial and was able only directly to send in his lawyer with an active watching brief. But indirectly he had offered help to Harrington, much as that must have caused him acute mental indigestion. Harrington had refused.

## Chapter Five

In defence counsel's room during a recess, Weightman vented his frustrated impatience on Harrington.

" It sounds as though you want to be found guilty ! Good Lord, man, do you realise what you're facing ?"

" I can't accept help from Green."

" Gilliland is calling Admiral Sir Khalifa Velasquez—"

" What on Earth for ? He was barely in the picture on—"

" He's now Space-naval member for research and design. I think we may have a problem with him." Weightman rubbed his temples. " I have to say I'd like a little more co-operation from you, Harrington." He didn't know that Harrington himself had seen the Director of Public Prosecutions to set this whole affair in motion. " You're accused of being a slaver. In the trade. Green is in the clear in law, he merely bought guarateed non-intelligent life forms. Now they're proving to be intelligent. Your ignorance of your own wares won't help—"

" I'm just a toy importer," Harrington said. " What Green chooses to do with what I supply him is not my concern."

" But it is if you specify it to be a certain type of merchandise. I cannot put that forward as a defence."

The case was receiving galaxy-wide interest. Of course the murder of Travers would not feature in the trial ; that was a separate issue and, in Harrington's mind, was not a murder at all. Eloff Khama's men had been protecting property in line of duty. The tape recording of the conversation, after being tested for forgery, was admissable as evidence. Harrington debated when to let Weightman have it.

Trial procedure involved an admixture of Anglo-Saxon justice with Napoleonic code overtones. The burden of proof was still on the prosecution ; but the judge and jury were still vitally concerned to ferret out the exact truth. Harrington had given tantamount to a direct clue to Weightman ; but he didn't want that sprung too soon. The trial had to come to its grisly and pre-determined conclusion.

There would be a re-examination of Marie, and cross-examination. Harrington felt desperately sorry for her. He now considered himself to have been wrong not to have confided in her ; but she had taken herself off in a temper when he'd announced his deal with Green and they had not spoken a word since. Harry Bates, too, had been on Terpsichore and since his imprisonment Harrington had had no word.

Going into court next day Harrington felt like a half-tamed animal being exhibited in a cage. The court was packed. The warm weather had brought out bright clothes and the public seats resembled a flower bed. Harrington concentrated on his notes in the dock. Today might well prove decisive.

All the drama of a man on trial for his life paraded before Harrington's tired eyes. He tried to ignore it. The single glimpse he again caught of Marie today unsettled him. He could not forgive himself for the misery he was forcing her through and yet there was no way now of mitigating that ; he would have to try to explain after it was all over.

That was always providing that he was not on the way to a penal asteroid.

Laurence Weightman gave the impression this morning of tiredness, as though he had not slept, had been up all night perusing law books and taped records. He sent up a slip to Harrington. " I have decided on a new line. Must see you in first recess."

Sir Khalifa Velasquez was the first witness. At once the Attorney-General, Sir Hugh Louis-Gilliland had trouble with him. Listening with an apprehensive wonder at the reason for the Admiral's appearance in court, Harrington realised that the Admiral was not reacting as Gilliland had expected. The two used question and answer like rapiers, without mercy, and the duel became plain to all listening. A note from the Attorney-General was sent up to the Judge, Lord Fraser of Aldebaran. Then Laurence Weightman rose to cross-examine.

" You have, I believe, Admiral, spent a number of years on Terpsichore ?"

" Ten Terran."

" So you must have formed firm conclusions about life there ?"

" I have. It is hell." A ripple of appreciative laughter rustled in the court. Lord Fraser frowned down.

" The—ah—growth, I believe it is called, covers the entire surface area apart from the poles ?"

" Yes. The damn stuff grows as you watch."

" And of the parasites infesting it—the vegetable parasites—you also have had experience ?"

" I have."

" What was your own observation of the accused when he was a lieutenant in the space-navy ?"

Velasquez gave a good report. Harrington felt surprise. The Admiral, he felt sure, had been scarcely aware of his existence. The odd thought struck him that the report was too good. Velasquez, he decided, had been briefed.

Then Weightman struck hard at the core of the case. " And in your very wide experience of Terpsichore and the Trapezana and these parasitic Zana vegetables—would you say that the Zana were intelligent ?"

An absolute quiet fell on the court. In that hush Sir Hugh Louis-Gilliland furiously wrote another note for the Judge. Harrington noticed that, and the way Weightman's clever face tired and lined, flushed with inner excitement.

Admiral Sir Khalifa Velasquez, very seriously, very deliberately, said : " In my experience of them the Zana are not and could never be intelligent."

Weightman sagged. " Thank you, Admiral. No more questions."

But his words were lost in the buzz that agitated everyone in the public seats. Here was a dramatic change-over in the

picture. Perhaps this character Harrington wasn't guilty of being in the trade, after all !

Harrington himself, the accused, gripped the rail and stared at the old admiral. He probably thought he was helping out an old space-navy comrade. But he had opened the first crack in the prosecution's attack and by so doing had appreciably weakened Harrington's own private gamble.

The notes sent up by the Attorney-General evidently had their effect then, for the Judge adjourned for twenty minutes. Harrington met Weightman bubbling with enthusiasm.

" Old Gilliland tried desperately to get an adjournment before I could ask that question. But he was too late. Velasquez had come up trumps—for us !"

" I don't see why. He was put in for the prosecution."

" Don't worry over that now. Reasons of high state—"

" Was that your new line ?"

" Only partly. That was really a gift from the gods as soon as I saw that Velasquez had been got at."

" Got at ? Who by ?"

" Don't worry over that now, Harrington. The new line needs absolute, irrefutable proof that Green bought those Zana from you knowing them to be sold as toys—"

" Oh !" Harrington stared at the barrister. He was a clever lawyer. It had been unlikely that he would miss what Harrington and his solicitor in Naples had been able to ferret out. Was it time now to tell him of the tape recordings ? They were perfectly admissable as evidence. Harrington said heavily : " Marie Rosslyn has given evidence that I knew what Green was going to do with them."

" That is awkward, I agrec. I think I'll go down to your offices if I may—your secretary knows me."

" Certainly. You'll find all the invoices neatly filed."

The look the barrister favoured Harrington with might have melted cold steel. " I wish I could understand you fully, Harrington. As I said before, it seems that you want to be convicted. D'you know what a penal asteroid is like, man ?"

" I've heard they're rugged." Harrington let slip a little more. " I think it might be a good plan to leave your new line until we've heard the rest of the prosecution witnesses and Gilliland's final speech."

Weightman nodded. "Precisely. I'll need the timc anyway."

The rest of the prosecution was a determined effort to eradicate the effects of Velasquez' remarks. The jury had plainly been affected by them. Whether Harrington was guilty or not, the processes of the law must find out the truth. Only then could the extent of his guilt or innocence be seen in perspective.

Sir Hugh deployed a weighty procession of learned scientists; botanists, micro-biologists, alienists, specialists on the myriad forms of extra-terrestrial life. From them all he extracted the view that the Zana were intelligent. But then, as Weightman pointed out, these witnesses had been hand picked by the prosecution. He would, he inferred darkly, be calling his own experts.

By the afternoon of the fifth day Harrington was heartily sick of the whole affair. He wished he'd never begun it. But then, if he hadn't set the mill stones rolling, he would have had to supply Green, and offend Marie, or go out of business and discharge the many people who now depended on him for their livelihood. He'd hoped to have it both ways. Marie, even now in these gloomy moments, seemed to him to be unattainable and in losing her he found he couldn't care even if he won the case. At least, won it on his own terms.

Sir Hugh Louis-Gilliland, the Attorney-General, delivered himself of his closing speech on the morning of the sixth day. It lasted until well into the evening, the Judge being unwilling to raise the court until the prosecution had closed their case. Harrington saw Weightman on the morning of the seventh day, the morning the defence opened, and was dismayed at Weightman's cheerfulness and confidence. " It was a sticky one, Harrington, until I put my finger on the one man who can destroy all that has gone."

" Who's that, then ?"

" Doctor Syngman—"

" Him ! I'd have thought with his friendship for Marie he'd be for the prosecution."

" He might want to ; but he cannot lie against his scientific principles."

" I suppose so. What about the new line ?"

" I don't believe we'll need that now."

" And if we do," put in Barnfield who was there, " we can always use it as a second line." He frowned. " I must say, Bill, you haven't been much help when it comes to instructing counsel. You've got to be more positive when you give your evidence—"

" Me ! But I'm not going into the box—"

Weightman was appalled. " But you have to, Harrington ! If you don't go in it's the same as saying you're guilty."

Harrington had to repress the immediate reply : " I'm not going." He thought a minute. " All right. But at the end. Only then. Otherwise, no soap."

Grumbling, Weightman had to accept that. The morning of the seventh day dragged as Weightman opened and then put up his witnesses. By the afternoon he put up Doctor Syngman.

In brief, the good doctor demonstrated that he was the galaxy's greatest expert on conditions on Terpsichore. He cited the work he had done, and mentioned that Harrington had discovered the Zana almost as a result of working for him. He said, flatly, that the Zana were mere vegetables, bundles of instinct and nothing more. Not intelligent.

He was the only expert witness Weightman put up. His lone testimony counted for more on the jury than all the parade of prosecution experts. Weightman's face was brilliant. Harrington was down to chewing his nails.

And then Weightman called Harry Bates.

Harrington was surprised. He thought he'd seen enough since the trial began ; but that Bates had not been to see him annoyed him and showed him that Bates believed the same evil of him as did Marie. Why then should Bates be on his side ? In the witness box Harry Bates looked nervous and ill at ease. Weightman went through the details fast, then : " And you opposed the sale of indoctrinated Zana to Green ?"

" Yes. I figured they deserved a better life than that."

" Even though they are only vegetables ?"

" Objection, my lord," from Gilliland.

" Objection sustained. You must confine your questions to those of fact," Lord Fraser blasted benignly.

" As a man who has lived on Terpsichore, as a man who has dealt in Zana, imported them, had to care for them, have you ever observed positive signs of intelligence ?"

The criterion of intelligence had already been established in the case of Terra versus Venusian Fungis three hundred years ago. Bates could answer that without hedging as to definitions. One lot of experts had said the Zana were intelligent. Doctor Syngman, the greatest authority on Terpsichore, said they were not. Harry Bates now simply said : " In my belief they are not intelligent."

Weightman, smiling, said : " Your witness."

Sir Hugh Louis-Gilliland was a man of strong principle. He was out for a conviction and he meant to get one. He rose slowly, hunching up his robes, peering for a few long-drawn moments at Bates. Harry Bates shuffled nervously.

" You were a lieutenant in the space-navy ?"

" Yes "

" You served aboard *Cougar*, the same ship as the accused, under Admiral Sir Khalifa Velasquez ?"

" Yes. For a short time, dealing with the growth on Terpsichore."

" I see. Tell me, Mr. Bates, have you seen the admiral recently ?"

Bates paused. He swallowed. Then : " Yes."

" When, exactly ?"

" Yesterday."

" Yesterday. Rather odd, was it not, to see the admiral again after so long, on the day before you testified here ?"

Bates was clearly uncomfortable. Harrington leaned forward. Weightman was looking down on his papers, his face hidden.

" I put it to you, Mr. Bates, that yesterday when you saw the admiral you were told certain things—certain secret things—that affected your testimony today."

The murmur in the court rose. Lord Fraser thundered his warning. Bates licked his lips and did not reply.

Gilliland gripped his robes. " I put it to you, Mr. Bates, that you were told to say that the Zana were unintelligent."

Laurence Weightman said sharply : " Objection !"

The Judge peered down, waiting. Then he said : " What is your objection ? Or is learned counsel for the defence objecting on merely general grounds ?"

Weightman coloured angrily. "This question is an invitation to the witness to admit he is committing perjury and as such is objected to on the grounds that he would be incriminating himself."

The Judge considered. Harrington, through all the legal by-play, caught a suggestion of wheels within wheels, of forces outside this court of law working away, and, it seemed, working away for his own salvation.

Finally Lord Fraser said fruitily : " Objection sustained." He didn't offer, however, to explain why. Gilliland, looking

furious, went at it again. He kept on at Bates, pulling all the tricks he knew, to make Bates admit that his testimony had been pressured, had been perjured on orders. Bates, with the frequent interjections of Weightman, stuck it out. When he left the dock he was pale and sweating and the effect on the jury was uncompromisingly plain. They believed they saw a man who had perjured himself and got away with it.

The jury plainly were in no doubt that Bates believed the Zana to be intelligent, despite evidence to the contrary, and that someone had got to him and shut his mouth.

That finished the seventh day. That evening Barnfield said : " Whew ! That was a near one. Harry was all for scuttling you, Bill, along with Marie, right up until yesterday. Then he came along and said he would testify for the defence. He only got in from Terpsichore the day before, and went straight to see Velasquez."

" I don't like it," said Harrington. " Who would get Harry to perjure himself ? Harry, of all people. He ought to have stayed on Terpsichore. I thought he intended that."

" He did," pointed out Weightman, smoking a cigar and looking smug though worried. " He was sent for by the Navy Board."

" But why ?"

" I think, Harrington, we ought to proceed on the second line." Weightman made no attempt to answer the question. " Bates didn't go over too well."

" I'll say he didn't ! The jury were convinced he'd been told to say what he had, and Gilliland tripped him up."

" I was afraid of that when Velasquez suggested it—"

" When what !" Harrington couldn't take much more. " Would you mind telling me just what is going on ?"

" Why not," said Barnfield. " It means you'll get off, and that's the main thing. The space-navy are interested in the Zana. If proved unintelligent, they plan to use them aboard spaceships. The plan is for small fast ships with Zana pilots and astrogators working on indoctrinations supplied by subradio as required—a horde of mosquito craft, manned by unintelligent vegetables responding to empathic battle orders. If they were intelligent now, well, they couldn't be used—"

A roaring in Harrington's ears drowned out the rest. His own schemes to protect the Zana by having them pronounced intelligent in a court of law were being thwarted by the high policy of the space-navy. It was so tragic he could laugh. The

space-navy wanted the Zana, and the use to which they wanted to put them was worse, far worse, in the eyes of Harrington—and of Marie, too, he knew—than the simple drudgery of a factory.

He would be found not guilty—and the Zana would be condemned to man warships of space as a direct result.

Harrington felt a very small, very insignificant little man right then.

## Chapter Six

The importance of this case in forming future relations of Terra with the alien worlds of the galactic federation could not be over emphasised. Some of that urgency was shown by the amount of time spent by leading counsel in court ; very little was delegated to subordinate counsel. Harrington sweated it out in his tiny room, in the dock, walking on his limited periods of exercise. He had sent a note to Marie asking her to call ; but he had had no reply.

Other witnesses were put up by Weightman, and each one powerfully confirmed that the Zana were unintelligent. Instinct, and instinct alone, ruled all their actions. They could feel no emotion, no pain and therefore their use in a factory would be perfectly legal. And also, unspoken in this court, their use in space to control swarms of midget warships also would be legal. They could do it, too, with the techniques of control originated by Redcrown's children and adapted by Harrington expanded and developed by those clever scientists of the space-navy research and development board.

A lack of interest in politics had always been a marked characteristic of Harrington's life. Now he saw that perhaps a little more knowledge might have been helpful.

Weightman told him that Sir Hugh Louis-Gilliland was married to the daughter of an extremely important politician and Gilliland's own loyalties to the party in power were suspect. He had been appointed Attorney-General some time ago ; his marriage had then been the subject of examination. Now it was clear to those in the know that Gilliland had changed his allegiance from his own party to that of the opposition and his father-in-law. The split in the government party was severe. Gilliland and his father-in-law as now firmly declared rebels

and opponents—albeit openly only through this sort of action in court today—wouldn't last long unless the government were brought down.

Clearly, Gilliland was taking no orders from them ; the space-navy board could intrigue away all it liked to get the Zana declared unintelligent. Gilliland was determined to have them declared intelligent and thus appreciably weaken the government through the admiralty. At the same time he would secure his conviction and Harrington would go to a penal asteroid.

" Very small beer," Harrington said. " I set the mills rolling and I'm being crushed up between them."

Gilliland hammered away at every witness and in three cases conveyed an impression of double-think to the jury. Weightman was growing more worried now. He, too, was being pressured by the government. Green, as a staunch government man, threw all his power into the fight.

Through the calm ceremony of court procedure one could glimpse the lurid flicker of hate and political battle thundering away off stage.

Harrington sat in the dock with head bowed wondering just what sort of genii he had conjured up.

Eloff Khama's guard was released from prison and the murder charge was quietly dropped.

If it suited Gilliland's book to be incorruptible the Judge, Lord Fraser of Aldebaran, was as incorruptible as the original stone tablets of Moses. All the high policy of Terra as manifested through her admirals of space wouldn't weigh a feather in the balances when Lord Fraser summed up. His god was law and the lawful administration of law. Outside that he might enjoy a good port, watching the rocket races, the latest tapes of Martian jazz and the cheerful comfort of his chambers ; but they were so far outside when he entered his court that their influence was nil. Harrington could expect scrupulous fairness from the Judge.

The galaxy's commentators reported the proceedings faithfully; but they were clearly nonplussed over forecasting the verdict. The battle had swayed backwards and forwards and each day had brought its quota of shocks and surprises.

At this time Harrington's greatest need was to talk to someone about his ideas, his plans, to seek reassurance that beside the titanic forces now locked behind the scenes his own

schemes were not just juvenile maunderings. His friends had deserted him, all spurning his actions save Matthew Barnfield and there, perhaps, Harrington worried, Barnfield helped merely because it was his job as the company's solicitor.

Whether Bill Harrington went to prison or not could have little significance except to himself and his immediate circle in face of the forces waiting for the drama to finish so that the real business of galactic government could take a fresh step. For Harrington saw plainly that a fleet of mosquito spaceships, manipulated by indoctrinated Zana in place of robotic devices would give Earth a tremendous boost in interstellar power. Then, perhaps, some of the perennial fear of extra-terrestrial competition and even of war would lessen.

" Until of course, the other aliens forced Zana out of the Trapezana and manned their own ships with them." Harrington paced his prison room savagely, hands thrust deeply into his trouser pockets, feeling like the man who rubbed Aladdin's lamp by mistake.

" They wouldn't be able to do that," pointed out Admiral Sir Khalifa Velasquez. He had called unexpectedly on Harrington. " We would control the planet even more thoroughly than we do now."

" You mean put it under a security blanket—and what happens to Redcrown and the Trapezana then ? There's, a whole planet involved, you know, not just one small corner of it."

" They would be taken care of. You were in the space-navy, Harrington. In case of trouble you'd be called on again. Bad leg or not. Your duty as a space-navy man and as an Earthman is quite plain—quite apart from getting yourself off this charge." Velasquez swung around, glowering. " Good God, Harrington ! Weightman told me you were acting oddly. I can see what he meant. Do you *want* to be convicted ?"

" Of course not !" That was true enough, anyway.

" Well, why are you taking up this—this—" Velasquez flung his hands out hopelessly at the impossibility of describing Harrington's position. " Why do you act as though you want the Zana to be declared intelligent ?"

Harrington couldn't answer that.

" Do you, admiral, think it right and proper that they should be used as you want to use them ? Cosmic fodder for your warmongering—"

" That's quite enough of that, Harrington !"- The bark was back in the admiral's voice and quite automatically Harrington straightened up. Then he said sharply : " I'm no longer in the navy and I'm not subject to your orders—"

" No, by all the—" Velasquez made for the door. " But you damn well soon will be."

He went out before Harrington could ask him to explain. But his intentions were plain enough. Harrington asked to see Weightman immediately.

They might call him back into the Navy and then give him his orders. But he'd damn well spike their guns first.

On the afternoon of the ninth day Harrington went into the witness box.

The court was so tightly packed you couldn't bend down to retrieve a fallen pencil. All over the Terran dominated portion of the galactic federation men and women watched their television screens, sensing with that unfailing nose of the mass public the drama and importance of this trial, hidden though most of the issue might have been. The judge sat lumpily in his great chair beneath the ornate emblem of United Terra. Laurence Weightman grasped his robes and slowly rose to his feet. Sir Hugh Louis-Gilliland was visibly composing himself. A woman snuffled somewhere in the body of the court and the sound penetrated like a rocket takeoff.

" You are William Quentin Harrington ?"

" Yes."

" You are the owner and managing director of Harrington Galactic Importers Ltd.?"

" I am."

Weightman, after establishing that he was talking to Harrington, went on to establish that the accused was of good character, had a fine if undistinguished space-navy record and was a good businessman in that he had built up by honest methods a large and growing toy business. Weightman emphasised the toy angle.

" And did you on the dates in question refuse to sell toys containing indoctrinated Zana to Julius Green ?"

" I did."

Weightman had to handle the pressure on HGI carefully. Green's man was there, waiting to pounce like a homing warhead. " Tell me, Mr. Harrington, why did you refuse ?"

" I did not wish to sell Zana into virtual slavery."

Heads nodded and whispered in court. Now what would Weightman do? He went on with outward calm: "But you were at last forced to sell Zana, and this you did in an unindoctrinated state?"

"Yes. It was a new policy we had adopted in view of the immense business we were doing and the lack of time in which to indoctrinate them. We also sold these raw Zana to many toy merchants. They welcomed the idea."

"Why were you in trouble production wise?"

"We had been heavily pressured and our supplies were being price raised, freight rates increased out of all proportion."

Very sensibly, Green's man said nothing. Anything he could have said at that moment would have blackened the case against Green still more. It was black enough as it was. Weightman had skilfully got the jury to understand what had happened.

Despite that comparative triumph, Weightman was clearly worried over the way Harrington's testimony was going. The old saw that counsel directs and controls the flow of answers did not always operate. Weightman paused, looking down, and then said: "You are familiar with the laws controlling the use of alien intelligences in industry and commerce: the extra-terrestrial slavery laws?"

"Yes."

"You understand that it is an offence to employ alien intelligences in tasks that put them into slavery, even if those same tasks would not by terrestrial standards be slavery?"

"I do."

"Have you ever, Mr. Harrington, knowingly sold alien intelligences into slavery or so employed them yourself?"

Very firmly—for this was the basis of his excape plan—Harrington said: "No. Never."

The murmur in the court this time carried the hint of derision of disbelief. Hadn't this man in the witness box deliberately sold his alien-gimmicked toys to tycoon Green for factory employment—and if that wasn't slavery, what was? Weightman caught that and like the great advocate he was over-rode it ruthlessly, caught the public's attention be his next manoeuvre.

At his command technicians wheeled into the body of the court a large refrigerated tank, a television camera which was connected up to screens set at strategic sites opposite jury, judge, recorders and public benches, and control equipment on

trolleys. A group of scientists followed, garbed for the occasion in white lab smocks.

Weightman explained. " The border between animal and vegetable life is vague, with some organisms qualifying for inclusion in both families. Usually these organisms are extremely small. That is on Earth. On Terpsichore, however, the class can be much larger. Equally, the division between intelligence and instinct is narrow. I propose to demonstrate that life can be impersonated by inorganic materials, and that this pseudo-life appears to be acting with intelligence." He looked across at the leading scientist. " And please do not continue the confusion between animal intelligence and instinct. We are dealing, as I think I have made plain, in vegetable life here. A dog is full of instincts but we regard him as intelligent. A plant that creeps up to the sun is also full of instincts ; but I suggest that no one can regard it as intelligent." The scientists gave the high sign. Weightman stepped off the stage.

The screens showed the interior of the refrigerated tank and a circular film about two feet in diameter. " They used to use soap," the chief scientist said, " but it kept breaking. We got over that by super-polymerisation." Cold vapours coughed out of the tank. " I am going to drop some ice-coated mineral cysts on to the film—" The scientist's voice trailed as he concentrated on dropping the ice crystals in without rupturing the tenuous film. " Ah ! There they are, see, small crystals lying on the surface at random."

The watchers saw the star-shaped ice patterns, very beautiful they looked ; and then, like ghosts repeating the same pattern and swimming up from the depths into sharp focus, other crystals began to form all over the film. " Here we have what can be regarded as pseudo-life forming, and following a pattern that negates entropy. Now—"

He sprinkled a few grains of red powder. At once the patterns began to swim over the film heading avidly for the red powder. The sight was macabre, bringing a strange air of super-science into the austere world of the law courts. It brought, too, a fresh understanding of the forces ranged behind this legal battle. The ice patterns had taken over the red powder now and it seemed to aid them in further growth.

The scientist dropped a virulent-looking purple powder. At once the crystals moved away, repelled, and where they were

not quick enough the purple powder destroyed them. And all the time the fog of coldness coughed from the tank.

" All that was self-explanatory," the scientist said. He dropped a bright yellow powder, sprinkling it into a circle. Outside that circle the purple colour spread faster and faster over the surface of the film, destroying the ice patterns as it went. Within the yellow circle the ice and red powder stayed quietly growing. At last only the patterns within the yellow remained. Outside seethed a sea of purple.

" Now, watch !" the scientist commanded sharply.

The mineral cysts dropped within the original ice crystals began to move. Slowly, they edged their way towards the yellow powder ring. When the first reached it, the yellow ring moved, wriggled away, forced itself out and thrustingly against the purple sea. Gradually the cysts forced the yellow ring outwards, devouring the purple, and soon the film was a living bath of red and icy crystals, safely ringed in yellow.

" Pseudo-life, yes ! Clearly that is what we have seen. But pseudo-intelligence ? Yes, for the *apparent* sequence of events suggested that the ice patterns used the mineral cysts as tools to construct the yellow ring into a defence against the purple horror." The scientist coughed. " I'm sorry ; we always refer to the purple as the horror."

One or two people laughed ; but the majority had been caught and impressed by the demonstration of forces at work, blind, inorganic forces thrust into actions at chemical behest and yet so faithfully reproducing the actions of an intelligent colony of living beings.

The scientific apparatus was cleared away. Laurence Weightman, filled with the conviction that one picture is worth a million words, prepared to knock the final nails into his case and secure the absolute discharge of the accused. For Harrington, seeing that deep jubilation in his counsel, the problem was how to do what he had to and yet not destroy Weightman in the process.

He had asked Weightman if he thought Gilliland would cross-examine. " Almost certainly," Weightman had replied.

So be it. Then the blow could be seen as no fault of Weightman ; the barrister was too good a man to suffer without recourse to redress.

In that moment of Weightman's triumph with the jury now swayed his way, the public and the Judge obviously impressed

by this demonstration that intelligence could so easily be faked by nature, Harrington gave a signal. Matthew Barnfield would get the message and would send in the tape recordings. They were vital if Harrington was not to spend the rest of his life breaking stones on a penal asteroid. Weightman received the recordings and, as had been arranged, would put them in when he rose for re-examination.

Then it was the Attorney-General's turn. Sir Hugh rose without fuss, his hands holding his robes limply. He knew he faced a stiff task. Harrington prepared to give him unexpected support.

Gilliland opened with a few casual, almost uninterested questions the answers to which he treated as though of no real weight. The climax arrived with startling suddenness.

" Now, Mr. Harrington, you have dealt a great deal with the Zana. You have bought and sold them. You have trained them to do tricks. Am I right in suggesting that you have a high personal regard for them ?"

" Yes."

" Good, Mr. Harrington, very good. I now put it to you that in your opinion the Zana are intelligent."

No one could expect a simple question like that to be answered except in one way, the way that Doctor Syngman, that Weightman's experiments, had shown.

Slowly, Harrington said: "I believe the Zana are intelligent."

The uproar was so great that the Judge had to adjourn.

Laurence Weightman's face was quite bloodless. He paced up and down the small prisoners' room, shaking, almost out of control. Barnfield sat still and quietly in a corner.

All that Harrington could seem to remember was the sight of Marie's face as he spoke those fateful words. She had surged upright as though he had struck her around the face.

Velasquez and Harry Bates walked in. Everyone treated Harrington as though he had leprosy. Then Velasquez tried sweet reason. " I don't believe *you* believe they're intelligent, Harrington. We've had them dissected. There is not the slightest trace of a brain or any—"

" Maybe protoplasmic beings require a brain full of grey cells. Maybe alien plants don't."

" You'll rot in prison for the rest of your life." Evidently the plan to call him back into the navy now that it was too late

would not be implemented. " Court is in session again," said Weightman. " Come on."

" Remember," said Harrington. " The recordings."

Sir Hugh Louis-Gilliland was more than happy to give the witness back to defence counsel. His case, as he saw it, had been made. Weightman introduced the recordings into evidence and Harrington told his story.

" I warned Green that I could not indoctrinate all the Zana for toys. He had told me that his children had them. He was merely another customer along with the toy merchants. These tape recordings, which have been proved genuine, will also prove that what I say is true."

The recordings played in open court did just that.

It was a legal loophole, and yet the greater was to follow and Harrington couldn't quite still the fine tremble in his fingers. Marie wouldn't look at him. Dammit all ! If he went to prison he'd be rid of her and her unsettling powers . . .

At this point the Judge intervened. Leaning forward and staring straight at Harrington, he said : " You have admitted that you were under the impression that the Zana were intelligent. Whether or not that is so is still the subject of one part of this enquiry. But, admitting that, you also admit that you trafficked in them, sold them to children as toys, made your living from them. Those that were sold to Green even though sold by you for use as toys were put to work in factories. Did it not occur to you that this was most improper conduct ?"

" I sold Zana to Green in good faith. As plaything, toys for children, not for use in industry."

"That may well be. But you have not answered my question."

Harrington took a deep breath. The crucial moment had arrived. And it had, rather strangely, come at the instigation of the Judge. " I did not in any way consider my conduct improper. The law is quite plain on the question. I have repeated that I refused to sell Zana for use in industry. Those that I bought and sold to children were not in industrial use. They were pets. The law says that alien life forms may be owned by terrestrials as pets. We buy and sell dogs and cats and canaries—well, I dealt in Zana—"

" Pets !"

Weightman's face was a sight of comfort to Harrington ; the second line had paid off. Gilliland was giving orders to his subordinates in a fury of action. The Judge leaned back. For

the moment he had withdrawn from the dusty strife of the court and retired to his Olympian heights.

And after that there were five more things to do.

One was the defence closing speech, delivered by Weightman with all the punch and power of a man determined to get his client off, despite what his client might seem to wish. He made the points that even if the Zana were intelligent, which he doubted, the accused was within the law in dealing with them as pets. He could lay no accusations against Green ; but the jury and public were left in no doubt as to who was the villain of the piece.

Gilliland, with his whole case shot to pieces before his eyes, fought back hard. The Zana, he said, were intelligent. He doubted if the toys could be classified as pets. To Harrington's undisguised thankfulness, Gilliland did not make out a case that would convict.

The third item was the summing up. This took eight hours. During it Lord Fraser indicated that he considered that the question of intelligence was one for the jury ; but that as in law Harrington was within his rights to trade in pets, on that count he must be found not guilty.

The fourth stage was the verdict.

The jury filed back after an hour.

" Have you considered your verdict ?"

" We are still in dispute over the intelligence, my lord—"

The jury went back. Harrington sweated.

When, after two more requests for guidance and another seven hours, the jury came back, Harrington felt as though he had been whipped by a sjambok.

" And your verdict is ?"

" That the Zana are intelligent ; but that the accused is not guilty of slaving."

" And that is the verdict of you all ?"

" It is."

" In that case I have to discharge you at once. Mr. Harrington, you may go."

After the hubbub, the shouting, the photographs, the questions from greedy reporters, Harrington was half-carried to a room in the back of the courthouse. He sat, swallowing, trying to grasp what must now happen to him. His gamble had

worked. He had obtained exactly what he wanted. The Zana declared intelligent and therefore protected from misuse. And, a fact that had been of varying importance throughout the trial as his personal feelings had changed, he had got off on a technicality. Pets were okay ; industrial workers weren't.

He congratulated Weightman and thanked him for his defence. " Only I was on trial, not the Zana. The fact of their intelligence or not had no bearing—at the end—on my guilt or innocence."

Weightman cocked his head on one side. " You wanted the verdict to go the way it did, Harrington. Isn't that so ?"

" Yes." The door opened and closed but Harrington went on speaking to Weightman. " I naturally didn't wish to be found guilty ; but I had to make sure that the jury returned a verdict on the Zana of intelligence. All the pushing of the case in that direction, by you no less than the prosecution, the emphasis that was laid on it even though at the end it did not affect the issue, was necessary. Even though between you and me and the doorpost the Zana are merely perambulating vegetables, I owed it to Redcrown—"

" Bill !" Marie's voice was choked, breathless, wondering. He swung to look at her, seeing her eyes shining, her lips trembling. " You mean you—why, you devil ! You risked imprisonment for life !"

He saw that he would have no trouble with her. She was blazingly angry with him for fooling her—she wouldn't go off into feminine sentimentality now. He was about to make the first steps on the road to a return to their old relationship when Admiral Sir Khalifa Velasquez stalked in and with him blew a blast of polar air.

He tore into Harrington without preamble. He finished : " So through your actions, Harrington, Earth is denied the gift of a swarm of mosquito craft able to deal with our potential enemies—"

Harrington realised he was suddenly tired of this cant, this rocket-rattling. He fixed Velasquez with his eye. He said : " Shut up, admiral ! From our experience of Homo sapiens we know damn well that as soon as he gets someone else to do the dirty work for him, employs mercenaries, he goes soft and runs to seed and the next tough fellow who comes along knocks hell out of him. You'd better continue to design our warships to be operated by men—and not rely on brainless vegetables, no matter how cleverly they may be trained."

Velasquez had to take a step backward, so shocked was he.

" Speaking as a barrister," said Weightman, " I can only agree with Mr. Harrington."

" And Mr. Harrington," said that worthy, looking at Marie, " has further work to do. I've got to make my fortune with the Zana as children's pets before the Reform League get around to outlawing that use for alien intelligences. As they will, as they will."

" I think Redcrown's kids would be very pleased with you, Bill," said Marie. She held out her hand. " I'd like to help. Want me ?"

A messenger put his head in the door.

" A Mr. Julius Green to see Mr. Harrington."

Harrington, taking Marie's hand, said over his shoulder : " Can't see him. I've a date with my company's secretary. On most important business indeed."

By the time they'd reached the offices of HGI they'd agreed to do something that no other Terrans had ever done before.

" Yes," Marie said.

" And we'll spend our honeymoon on Terpsichore," Harrington said, chuckling.

—Nelson Sherwood

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*Some worlds were closed to visiting Earthmen, whether in distress or not. There were special reasons, of course.*

# STARK REFUGE

## by JOHN KIPPAX

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### Chapter One

Han de Witt, the astrogator of the *Dromio*, was a tall heavy man of Dutch parentage. Now, as he worked with a hand computer on figures which ETHEL, the wrecked main job, would never spew out again, he kept his mind on his work with that singleness of purpose which was his most outstanding attribute. That characteristic enabled him to ignore the activity which he knew was going on in the rest of the ship, where engineers were working furiously, fantastically suited, both inside and outside, trying to assess the damage to the engines. A meteor no bigger than a golf ball had ripped through the triple skin and ploughed half the length of ETHEL, and one not much bigger had made a filthy mess of an engine. The *Dromio* was a fine ship; as soon as the collision occurred the automatics swung into action, brought the ship out of hyperspace, and set it for the nearest planet. But damage was extensive; now, the astrogator was trying to find out where they were. He would find out, but the process took time.

His assistant, Dave Carel, a skinny youngster from Stockton, Illinois, looked up from his bench.

" If nothing blows, we should get the answer off this mess in about two minutes. That is, if it's taking all I've fed." He waved a hand at a large section of planet which showed in the viewscreen. " That could be anything—one of half a dozen systems."

When Han de Witt frowned with thought his big face seemed to take on an an expression which showed his part Indonesian ancestry. It was like that now.

" I've been figuring ahead, Dave. I think I've got it down to three." He put down his paper on the bench. " The figures of our exit for hyperspace are clear. I've checked. I say that we're round a planet of either Kindros, Kirila One or Kirila Two."

Dave whistled. " Wow! And you did this all with a pencil and paper? Chief, you make me ashamed of myself! "

" Save your agony. We'll see what the remnants of ETHEL say." He glanced up at the wall speaker. " It's a good crew, Dave. They're really going it, out there, but they know when to leave us alone. Still—" he reached up to a switch. " Let's hear what goes out on the air."

A jangle of voices erupted from the speaker.

*" Don't give a damn. Sacrebleu! Who told you zat it is as simple as zat? I want a repair base, I tell you—"*

" That's Louis doing his nut," said Carel.

*" Two hundred and fifty; and going up! Brother, this'll need a washout to end all washouts! "*

" Who was that? " asked de Witt.

" Steiger, I think. One of the junior engineers. He'll be round at the hot end. Sounds real hot, too—"

*" Come on Louis. I want a proper assessment, not a war dance—."*

" That's Hunsecker," said Han.

*" Absolute madness to try it, sir. We've got to get down on a planet with a reasonable gravity. Oh, the sealing's done. Point one leakage—."*

That voice was high, flowing, and strained.

Carel looked grave.

" That was Dan Kisonga. Going to be trouble there. His voice goes like that when he gets an attack—."

The temporary computer whirred. A phone buzzed, and Carel picked it up. De Witt cut the speaker switch, and there was silence, except for the click and whirr of the relays.

"Thanks, Ed." Carel put down the phone, and made a face. "Crombie says he thinks we've got a wrong circuit somewhere. No point in my staying here. Shall I go and help?"

"You do that, Dave. I still think that my figures here will be right, though."

"See you later." Carel went out, leaving his chief staring at the slip of paper.

"Must be one of these three," muttered Han to himself. "Must be, unless we were off course, which God forbid."

He did not know that the ship's doctor had come in, until he was lightly kissed on the cheek.

The *Dromio* had been going home when the accident happened. A large ship, with a total crew of a hundred and five, her main job was survey; in effect, that meant that the crew had to be ready for anything, as did any ship which ventured out so far on to the rim, where Earth's power was weak, and other cultures, born of other minds, were in control. Certainly, even in these far, mind-shaking stretches of space, the authority of the Galactic Council was paramount; nevertheless, with so many many civilisations of all kinds, it was only natural that difficulties should arise, especially when the Galactic Council went to such trouble to shield from interference any culture which did not wish to be interfered with. But now the *Dromio's* task was done; ten new cultures had been investigated and classified, and the results of those investigations already sent ahead to Galactic Council HQ, as the law demanded. Had it not been for the accident, she would have been home to Earth in less than a month of that planet's time.

No one in the crew had any doubt that the difficulty could be got right. Her skipper, John Hunsecker, was a firm hand over them all; Louis Chavasse, his chief engineer, though excitable, offset his chief's stodginess, and was an expert. Forty now, he had been a senior engineer for twelve years. In every branch of the ship there was confidence.

The *Dromio's* doctor kissed her husband again; then he held her out in his arms, and looked at her with a searching anxiety.

"Leela, dearest, how are you? How do you feel? Not been overworking, have you? And sit down, please!"

Leela laughed. She said, " I'm the doc, remember. I know I'm all right." But she sat down, and, though she tried, she could not sit down gracefully any more.

He came and stood by her. " How's it going out there? " He gestured round. " I mustn't move, until I find where we are. We've got a rough rig going. Carel's just gone out to check with Crombie."

Leela's dark eyes were placid. " I think there must be more men outside the ship than inside. There's a squad doing a radar check, and then Louis' men must be round the end there like flies round a jampot. It seems that it's a whole engine gone, pile and all. I think they're going to jettison."

" Lot's of radiation? "

" Yes. But there's a decontam squad working in relays, clearing it constantly. And the sealing from inside is OK."

" I heard that on the speaker."

Leela chuckled. " Carol Longmer's out there, in a suit. She didn't have to, but you know her."

Han frowned. " Answer to the crewman's prayer."

" Well—she's a good nurse. Knows her job.'

" Kisonga out there, as well? "

" Yes—oh, that reminds me. I ought to get him in. I told Louis that he mustn't overwork. But overwork's that man's hobby." She rose quickly, and bumped lightly into a bench. He was at her side in an instant.

" Be careful, for God's sake! "

She smiled tenderly. " Han, who's having this baby, you or me? I tell you, he's all right. We're both of us fine. Who knows better than his mother *and* his doc? "

Her husband spoke with quiet intensity. " I wanted you to be home, to have him at home, on Earth! Remember, nine years ago, I had another wife, who was to bear my son. She died before he was born—so they both went. I'll not have that happen again. You're precious, Leela, so precious! "

" I know how you feel. It makes me feel wonderful, too."

He held her gently. " You know what you mean to me? Roots, and security, and home. Once I'm home, we'll stay home. I'll get an instructing job, some place, or with a factory that's in my line. And we'll have a house and a family. A family! How many, Leela?

Once more that tender smile; he knew that he would kill for her, if he had to. " We'll pause at half a dozen."

A crewman knocked at the door, and put his head in. "Lieutenant de Witt, sir? Message from sub-lieutenant Crombie. The computer should be coming through, now."

"OK." De Witt moved to the crude little rig, with its parts showing and its crazy tangle of coloured wires. He picked up his own estimate on the way. "Wait," he said to the crewman. His wife moved close to him.

"Seven seven double A four—seven seven double A five—and eight!" He flashed the piece of paper at Leela. "How's that for a spot of brain work from your old man?" He said to the crewman, "Ask Mr. Carel to get back here, and work out the actual planet."

The crewman saluted and left.

Leela cried, "Oh, Kisonga!" and picked up the phone. "Get me CPO Jennings, sick bay." She waited, drumming her fingers. "Jennings? Doctor de Witt here. Have you seen Kisonga lately?" She listened. "Ah, in with you now—yes, that was right. Yes, good."

As she put down the phone, Han said, "What about him? Will you have to put him under?"

"I hope not."

"I hope not, too. As a chief tiffy, he's worth more than three junior commissions."

"Yes, but he's too conscientious. Now that's making it worse. He held back on telling me about his feelings. His geo-nostalgic psychosis has been with him for three months."

Like everyone else in the crew, Kisonga was supposed to be free of the g-n psychosis, which, in earlier times could strike down half a crew, filling them with melancholy and thoughts of suicide, making their co-ordination weak. *A longing for Earth.* That was what it was, and Dan Kisonga had it.

Carel came in, grinning. "How'd you make out? Hallo, doc." He looked at the figures. "Yeah, I thought that was what you said. I'll soon whittle it down, now." He said to Leela, "You're husband's a genius."

Carel took down two hefty almanacs.

The annunciator rasped with Hunsecker's voice. "All chiefs of departments and first artificers to control room at once, please. At once."

There was enough room in the *Dromio's* control centre to accommodate all officers, without undue squashing. Now

the engine control panels were almost without a flicker, save for the angry glow which showed in three lights, yellow, orange and red, on number four engine. The astrogation repeater globes were lifeless, but the centres of attraction were the five viewscreens. Three gave pictures of the planet which the *Dromio* was orbitting, a fourth was blank, except for the stars. The fifth made Han de Witt shudder. The engineers had rigged up a tv camera, backed by floodlights, so that it showed the damage done by the meteor. Eighty feet of tail plating had been sheared away, chopped clean out like a slice off the end of a sausage. Black grotesque figures moved about and jetted across the ruin, using what looked like monstrous fire hoses. The cleaning squads.

He shook his head. Leela was with him. He said, " Our son won't be born on Earth. Not with that to put right—"

Hunsecker's crisp voice cut across Han's thoughts. " Now, listen, everybody. First and most important, there's no one hurt. That's largely due to the execution of crash drills and to the organisation of Doctor de Witt. The radar is not a big job, though messy and tiresome. But look at that last screen."

The assembled officers looked at it and commented strongly. Louis Chavasse, plump, dark and jowly, engaged his captain in earnest conversation. Hunsecker nodded, and made a gesture, as though to say, *go ahead.*

Chavasse spoke in English, sounding like French Canadians anywhere. " The situation is very simple. We are one engine short. The only thing my men could do was to seal off from inside, then cut away and clean from the outside. They've done a good job. *But we are one whole engine short.*" He looked around. " De Witt? '

" Here."

" How far from home? "

" Can't be right accurate. But it's over three Earth weeks at hyperspace travel."

Groans from the assembly. Leela nudged him as a door opened and Dan Kisonga stepped in, his dark brown skin shining in the harsh lights. Han saw, and nodded.

Chavasse continued. " With this ship, you need four drives to get you into hyperspace. I have the spares for a complete engine room. But I don't have all the outside plating, to make a really safe job."

Hansecker asked, "But wouldn't it be possible to rig your fresh engine in space?"

"It would, barely. But I'm not going to try it. Even if I could get it done, up here in orbit, I shall have to have the ship down on a planet for a complete prelim and I want to be sure. I *have* to be sure. There's a planet a few thousand miles below us. If its at all suitable, we'll get down there, and do the job, somehow. But I'll not have my crews up here, working in suits all the time, and filling the sick bay with spaceheaded nitwits."

"Hear, hear!" murmured Leela, with feeling. Spacehead was that disturbing affliction which struck a man when he had to work weightless for a long time. It was like a super seasickness, allied to ear disturbances which stopped him from walking properly, and an eerie defocusing of the eyes—all of which kept him useless from two to five days.

"No good your counting on that planet, or any other planet," said Hunsecker. His voice was cutting. "You don't know what it is, yet. We may not be able to land on it, for physical or legal reasons."

It was more like a democratic discussion between equals, than between officers of varying grades, but the reason was not far to seek. Spit and polish damn-your-eyes-man discipline didn't work in deep space. Instead, a crew was chosen with careful attention to the complete attributes of each member, so that they could work together as a team, a harmonious, psychologically integrated whole. Mostly, the pattern succeeded. There were sometimes exceptions; one of them stood near Han and Leela de Witt, at that moment. His name was Chief Artificer Dan Kisonga.

"Listen, John," returned Chavasse. "I want to get home; we all do. And the sooner we find out about that planet, the better. And we shan't be long in finding out. I sent out a flying eye as soon as we got into orbit." He jerked a thumb at one of the radio ops. "Karasawa's been in touch with it for the past hour."

A murmur went through the group.

Hunsecker swore, and marched up to Chavasse. He did not raise his voice a great deal, but there was an edge to it which told of much control over his feelings.

"*Mister* Chavasse," he said, formally, "it's been a long time since I put an officer under arrest. But it could happen

right now. We don't know what that planet is, for certain. We don't know anything about it. For all we know, it's a closed planet. If Galactic Law says that that's what it is, then we clear off on normal engines to the next planet on which we *can* land. You may have violated a planet's privacy already!" Chavasse wanted to speak, but Hunsecker, his face a little redder than normal, cut him silent with a gesture. "We keep the law, no matter how inconvenient it is. Break it, and we shame all our kind throughout the known galaxy; there are only four of our kind in the twelve of the Galactic Council, remember!"

"John," said Chavasse, striving not to let his Gallic temper come to the top, "I want to get this thing right, so that we can go on! I've got responsibilities, we all have. Give me the facilities, and we'll get that engine right and ready in a fortnight, if we can get down to a gravity that's near our own, and decent working conditions. Hell, that's all I want."

During the pause that followed, a deep voice said, softly, "Let's get home, for God's sake!"

They knew, without turning, that it was Kisonga.

Leela moved to his side.

"How are you, Dan?"

"I'm OK. Jennings called me. Gave me a pill." He showed his white teeth in an attempt at a smile.

Hunsecker walked over to the radio section, and stood behind Karasawa. "Clear a screen and a code panel for that thing." He looked at Chavasse from under heavy brows. "Since we've already broken Galactic Law, we might as well get some benefit from it."

Karasawa switched off the screen which showed the damaged engine area, and, instead, appeared a picture which showed a green and brown countryside, with broad roads. At the same time, a smaller panel rendered into letters and figures the data which the eye picked up. They read off the code.

"Grav eight tenths . . . breathable . . . oxygen about twenty-five per cent . . ."

"Jackpot!" cried Chavasse.

"Look!" Leela gripped Han's arm. "Buildings, flycars, streets with people!"

"Well," asked the chief engineer of his skipper, "how about it, John? Nobody seems to mind—"

" Don't they? " asked Hunsecker, in a hard voice. He was watching the picture. In front of the scanner on the eye, now only a couple of thousand feet over the alien city, appeared little black smudges.

" The natives aren't friendly," said Han, " they're shooting at it—they hit it! "

The screen went blank.

In the ensuing silence, Crombie came in, and handed de Witt a paper. Han glanced at it, and moved out from the group to the skipper.

" Yes? "

" We've checked the planet, sir. It's all the scanner showed us; it's Draneth, third planet of the Kindros system, colonised and run by Kirilans. Kirilan One system is a year away, at ordinary travel sir."

" Why bother to tell us that? " snapped Chavasse.

" Because," he said levelly, " under Galactic Law, Draneth is a closed planet."

## Chapter Two

There needed to be no further explanation It was the law that, if a planet wished to be secluded, and if the Galactic Council was satisfied that there was good reason, then no alien ship might land on that planet, or have anything to do with the people on it. Obviously, the Kirilans had satisfied the conditions, and Draneth, third planet of the sun called Kindros, was theirs to develop without anyone else in the whole galaxy being able to ask the simplest question and get an answer.

Hunsecker was tough. He showed no emotion. " In that case," he said, " we shall be longer getting home than we thought. About a year, in fact. Louis, get your three engines under way as soon as you can, and report in. Kirila One is our next stop."

Silence.

" He means it! " muttered Han.

" He means it! " muttered several others.

Chavasse found difficulty in speaking. " Are you serious? *Can* you be serious? Down there is a planet where I could get this job done, safely, in maybe a fortnight,

where I could check and be sure, where we could rest a little, from which we could lift in safety. And you say that we limp along to Kirila, instead? "

His voice ended on a high, strained note. They felt sick at the thought of being out more than a year. Leela gripped Han's arm; all around were strained, angry faces.

Then, someone sobbed. It was Kisonga. The man was covering his face with his hands. Leela went to him, and led him out. She called a crewman to take him to Jennings, who would give him further sedation. But it didn't settle anything. There was only one cure for Kisonga. How many more men might begin to feel like him, with the sickening knowledge of all the time ahead of them? They might feel resolute about it at first, but as time wore on it would eat into their souls. Her mind ran over a few crewmen's names, men who might become a danger if they had to stay overlong in space. She could think of a dozen who were not as stable as she would have liked.

"That is what I say. We can only go to Kirila. We have enough reserve supplies for five years. We can do it."

She whispered to Han. "If he does, the *Dromio* won't be much more than a sick bay. He must know that! "

"He does. He wants to get home as much as anyone. But you know Hunsecker. God fearing and law abiding. And not much imagination— "

"John! " This was Chavasse again. He kept his voice down. "You give the orders, we obey them." Breathing heavily from his open mouth, he shook his head at his superior. "But I can't promise anything, can't give any guarantees about what this decision could do to us. You understand? "

"I can give you a guarantee," said Hunsecker, "that the law will be obeyed! "

Karasawa's high voice cut it. "Message from Draneth! And vision too, I think. Number one screen! "

They watched; none could tell what the picture might show. Draneth, colonised by Kirilans, was a 'human' planet, but that was a wide term. These might be rubbery, ugly creatures that came into the classification simply because they had the right number of heads and arms and legs.

The sound crackled, the screen spat and flickered.

"Hallo, alien ship, hallo."

"Clear, human voice," whispered Leela.

"And speaking good Galactic," said Han.

"Please identify yourself. Draneth control centre here."

Karasawa handed Hunsecker a mike.

"Earth ship *Dromio*, registration EAR five one one seven. Mixed Earth crew. On official survey work . . ."

He signalled to Karasawa. "Get me a picture."

The Japanese op nodded, and fiddled anxiously, while Hunsecker gave his details.

The Dranethan continued. "I have to complain that you sent a spy eye down to this planet. This is against the law. You realise that we killed it?"

"I realise that we made a mistake. It was due to the anxiety of one my officers . . ." Hunsecker explained the situation. Before he had got far the Dranethan stopped him.

"One moment please, *Dromio*. One of our city committee wishes to take over this conversation. His name is Marpa-Eh."

Still the screen flickered. Leela and Han were aware that someone was close behind them. Leela turned, and smiled when she saw that it was Carol Longmer.

"Hallo, doc. What's going on?" She gazed at the screen. Han turned and gave her a smile. Most people did give Carol a smile. She was a good nurse, but she was just that bit good looking. Very occasionally, she went on the loose, and some lucky crewman thought that he was home on Earth again. She was big and blonde and in a few years' time she would be motherly. But not now.

The screen glowed into life. A face appeared.

"Wow!" That was Carol. "What a hunk of man!"

The Dranethan face on the screen was all that. He was brown, and very straight featured, with hair which was almost bronze in colour, and eyes of deep amber, very steady. His uniform was simple, white, with an open neck.

He repeated his name. Hunsecker re-identified himself.

"I regret that we had to resort to minor violence with your spy eye. But I'm sure you understand that this is a closed planet. That is quite unalterable. But we will help you if we can. Now, what is your problem?"

Hunsecker and Chavasse did it between them. Marpa-Eh no doubt had his transcribers going. He was on the ball, and it was not often that he asked for explanations. When

Chavasse got on to details of plating needed, and steel quality, there was some confusion of terms. The *Dromio's* listeners gathered that Dranethan ships did not need such hard material as those of Earth. When it was sorted out, Chavasse did not look too happy.

"Marpa-Eh," said Louis Chavasse, "it looks like your material would be good, but it's probably too soft. If we could come down to your planet—"

"No!" Marpa-Eh, who had already won the respect of the listening Earthmen in the time he had been in contact with them, sounded quite sharp. "That cannot be! It is the law that we remain a closed planet!" He stared out of the screen for some seconds, with a fixed expression. "Listen, we will send up engineer ships, with test materials. We will let you have the best technicians, we will give you all we can, *but your ship must stay in orbit!* Have you a physician on board? May I speak?"

Hunsecker turned, and beckoned Leela. She came up to the eye. Marpa-Eh reacted.

"So your females are like ours, too! Doctor, do your riggers get spacehead when they are on long periods outside?"

"They do."

"We have the cure. We will send that also. Is there anything else that we could help with, medically?"

She shook her head. "Nothing, at the moment. Thank you. Do you have details of our physiology?"

"I do not. But arrangements could be made. However, we must see, later. May I speak to your chief, again?"

Leela stepped down, and Hunsecker took her place.

Marpa-Eh continued. "It is agreed, then, that we send up anything which will help, together with our engineers, for the repairing of the hull and the installation of a new engine. Also food, if you need it. In fact, if you need anything, just ask. We may be able to supply it." He smiled, showing fine white teeth.

"But," put in Chavasse, "about that steel. If it's not hard enough? If we have to land, so that—"

"If you try to come down to the planet," said Marpa-Eh, "the consequences would be fatal. We live and act by non-violence, for almost all our lives, until we go back to uncreation. But if you try to land, your ship will suffer the same fate as that spy eye, and as quickly. Those are my orders."

There was no mistaking it. Marpa-Eh, speaking for his planet, meant every word he said. And he was fully within his rights according to Galactic Law.

Hunsecker said, "You are kind, and we respect your wishes, of course. We accept."

"John," whispered Chavasse, "if that steel isn't hard enough, what are we going to do? Waste weeks here, and then find that we have to go on to Kirila after that?"

Marpa-Eh asked. "May we, down here, meet some of your crew?"

"H'm? Oh, of course." He signalled to Karasawa, who scanned for him. Hunsecker introduced the officers present, including Carol Longmer. Han wondered what sort of reaction she produced among the Dranethans.

These courtesies lasted five minutes. At the end of that time, the handsome face on the screen vanished abruptly. Sound was cut off too. Then Marpa-Eh reappeared.

"Your details about the steel you require have been noted," he said, "and I am commanded to say that, in the opinion of metallurgists here, it will be necessary to liaise with you over this matter. The question of your being allowed to land on this planet is being re-considered."

Through all the annunciators in the ship, the voice of John Hunsecker sounded clearly. In engine rooms, at desks, in kitchens and control points, men stood alert, listening.

". . . Have agreed to allow us to land on the planet Draneth. This decision means that, with the co-operation they have offered, we shall be home with the delay of three Earth weeks, at most. The conditions are as follows—and, let me warn you all; if they seem peculiar, or even harsh, we must obey them. We are privileged people, guests of a civilisation every bit as advanced as our own. We shall set down at a specified point, which will be many miles from any inhabited place. They are preparing accommodation for us within the area. We must not go beyond five kilometres of that area, and we must remain completely incurious about any of the Dranethans with whom our work may bring us into contact.

"Any infringement of this regulation could result in our being thrown off the planet and told to make our own way home, as best we can. That would be the equivalent of a death sentence; nevertheless, in law, they can do so if they wish. Further points. This is a democratically administered

planet, peopled by humans from the Kirila One and Kirila Two systems. Their ruling body is a committee, and their chairman, Serema-Da, has been in touch with me personally. It is he whom we have to thank for urging his committee to let us land. He was impelled, so he said, by the need of humans to help humans, and on that basis over-rode the 'closed' planet ruling.

"Everyone, every single member of this crew, must bear in mind constantly the conditions of which I have spoken. For anyone who breaks the spirit or letter of these conditions, I can promise him, at the very least, a discharge without honour when we get home. That is all."

Han was with Leela in the sick bay. Carol Longmer was there too. She and Jennings were checking Dan Kisonga.

Leela said, "I wonder why they changed their minds? I wonder why they don't want anything to do with us?"

"Stop wondering." said Han. "It's—" he broke off as the nurse and the CPO came up. Kisonga was just behind.

Leela smiled at them. "Well?"

"He's OK."

Leela asked him, "Well, Dan?"

"I feel fine now, doc," said the artificer. "I'm sorry to have been such a trouble." He smiled broadly. "I know I was wrong, bottling it up. I guess I'll find a home job, at the end of this trip. If I get taken like this again, it could be serious."

"Dan," said Leela, "I hope you realise what has brought about the change in you. It may be my treatment, in part, but it's largely because you know that we're going down to an Earth type planet for a spell. You know that you're going to feel your feet on the ground, that you're going to work with a sky and a sun above you. That's the only cure for what you've got. Oh!" she added impulsively, "it's good to see you really normal again, instead of the glowering creature I've seen." She seemed suddenly contrite. "Oh, I know that wasn't spoken by a doctor. It was from someone who's fond of you."

Kisonga said sincerely, "It's because you're fond of most of us that you're such a good doc. How's the baby?"

"Fine."

"I've got three to get home to. Hope the tapes and so on are keeping their old man's memory green." He smiled "Am I discharged, doc?"

"Report for check every day."

"I'll do that. Thanks." He went out.

Carol Longmer said, "He's such a good man. Think he'll be OK?"

"Can never tell, Carol. I hope he will—"

A steady beeping of a buzzer, three groups of three, sounded at a hundred points throughout the ship. It said, 'First landing warning. All personnel to stations.' As soon as it finished, a voice asked for Lieutenant de Witt to go to control.

Han rested his arms on Leela's shoulders. "This is it. Down to a closed planet. I wonder how many Earth ships have ever had this happen to them?"

She said, "I hope it's for the best. But otherwise, I suppose I'd be landing on Earth with a son over a year old."

He said seriously. "Just as long as we get our son. That's all that matters to me. Anything that tends towards that, is fine. Anything that's against it, I'll take apart."

"Han, don't look so fierce!"

"I'm sorry. Was I looking fierce? But I meant what I said, Leela. I choose you first, last and all the time. I love you." He kissed her lightly. "Did you know."

Then he was gone.

The ship, guided by the Dranethan control officer, came down steadily on to a broad plateau of grey-brown rock. Chavasse had a tricky time getting the thrust balanced, with one engine completely gone, but he and Hunsecker set her down so that no one's teeth were jarred. They went through the routine efficiently; it was typical of Hunsecker that, though the flying eye had reported on conditions necessary for human life before the Dranethans shot it to pieces, he should demand routine tests run before a lock was opened.

Eventually, Earthmen stepped out on to Draneth. Beyond the plateau rose blue hills, and there were some scrubby bushes, with a stunted tree, here and there. About half a kilometre away stood a group of huts, about twenty in all. The majority were white, but a couple were painted red, glaring splotches in the arid landscape.

There was a reception committtee. It was headed by Serema-Da, who had been chiefly responsible for their

being allowed to land. He was grey haired, handsome, and rather sad looking. With him were a group of Dranethans, all looking of much the same type, with rather less variation in characteristics than might have been found in a comparable group of Earthmen. Hunsecker greeted Serema-Da, and then followed the senior officers, Han included. Leela was not there, having begged to be excused, but Carol Longmer was present, eyeing the Dranethans appreciatively.

"Welcome, captain." The Dranethan handshake was no more than a touching of the fingertips, but it was sincere, or seemed to be. "We have everything ready for you. Sleeping quarters for your crew, in various ranks as you asked, a dining room, kitchens and so forth. We can rig you a workshop hangar close to the ship, and an awning of sorts for when you are actually engaged in fitting. Here with me you have an engineer, a metallurgist," he pointed them out in turn, "whose names you will soon get to know. They are on their tunics, you see. Here also you have a liaison officer, a medical orderly, in case we have to help you with anything at all in that direction, and—" here he hesitated, "—I must use the word for 'policeman,' though they are not exactly that. Shall we say, 'guide and protector'? He has three assistants with him, who will live on the site while work is in progress."

Hunsecker and his officers kept their expression under control. They read the name of the chief policeman, Mantro-Ke. He was a large creature, sullenly good looking, and about forty, by Earth standards. Han could see that Carol Longmer admired him.

Hunsecker asked, "We didn't expect policemen?" He smiled.

Serema-Da smiled back. "It is the nearest I can get, in Galactic. But crime is very rare, here, and these men are what I said, guides and protectors. You will see."

Han de Witt, watching his chief, felt that he would not have liked to be in his chief's shoes. True, the galaxy was pretty civilised, and this was a civilised planet. True, the power of the Galactic Council extended as far as this. And, true, it was a good idea that Hunsecker had let Galactic HQ (repeat Terra) know—*"Invited to land Draneth (Kindros III) for vital engine repairs."*

## Chapter Three

It seemed that things could hardly have been bettered. The difficulty about the hardness of the metal was on the way to being solved within a week of the ship landing. The crew were comfortable, the building of the new engine was going well. The men were healthy, which, to Leela de Witt, was a blessing, for she needed to take things very steadily. The cops, as Mantro-Ke and his three assistants were called, were unobtrusive. It had been requested that their living quarters be not approached, and of course, the Earthmen obeyed this request.

For much of the time, Leela stayed in the ship. Her quarters and her husband's were better air conditioned than those provided by the Dranethans. She checked stores in a leisurely fashion with Jennings and Carol Longmer, and for days she had gone about with a faint smile hovering over her fine features, lost in the joy of approaching motherhood.

The site was visited daily by groups of Dranethans, who arrived in flycars which dropped out of the bright, green-blue sky with absolute silence. The visitors would walk round, touch hands, chat in Galactic, show how interested and charmed they were, and generally behave perfectly. Always, on such occasions, one of the 'cops' would be hovering near. He never said anything; he simply stayed around. Some of their females, too, came. They appeared to be as technically knowledgeable as the men, and as handsome. Hunsecker confined one crewman to quarters (aboard) for winking. He said that he didn't know how such a thing might be taken, but it was better not to chance it.

And when the visitors left, the Earthmen knew just as much about them as they did before they arrived.

Han de Witt, having worked out his courses and co-ordinates all ready for the return journey, put on a suit of dungarees and worked along with the building crew. Other officers followed his good example. He worked with Dan Kisonga, a lot.

"How are you feeling?"

"Oh, not bad sir," Kisonga kept an even voice, but his smile was absent. "I think of home, and how soon we'll be there."

Han nodded cheerfully. Perhaps it was a measure of his character that he worked under the African artificer's

instructions, doing the job of an ordinary crewman, helping as one of a team that sweated on the eighty foot scaffolding round the tail, fitting the pile seating.

Leela said, "Yes, I know they're working well. But, all the same, there's not a man in this crew that won't be glad when we lift."

"But these people have been fine!" protested Han. "Look what they've done for us."

"Maybe. I know all that. But there's a strange feeling about the whole thing."

"Oh, come. There's bound to be. They're humans, but they're not humans. I mean, they're like us, but they're bound to be different, in some respects."

She looked at him oddly. "You seen me about much?"

"Why no, but with the baby so near, I don't expect to. I mean—Leela, what's the fey expression about?"

"Was I wearing one? Sorry. Perhaps it's this all important son that *is* doing it. But I've a feeling that it might be a good thing if I did stay inside the ship. Oh, it's only a feeling. But, now that we've got the direct ports open, I've studied our surroundings a lot. Have you noticed anything suspicious, anything you didn't like?"

Han decided that he must be patient. "Such as what?"

"I've been snooping, with the binoculars. Using all the different lenses in the set. Firstly, the protectors run a permanent scanner from their little HQ. Secondly, the site is under observation all the time. There's always a flycar up above us, mostly with a light shield on it. Maybe we shouldn't let them know that we can detect that little trick, eh?"

Han moved restlessly, coming to a stop at one of the direct ports, Hunsecker had called off night work, now that the job was going so well. There were a few floods round the site, and lights were in the dining room and the men's quarters.

"You shouldn't worry about that. This was a closed planet, remember? And Serema-Da and his associates invited us down and got us out of a jam. All we have to do is to keep our noses clean."

"I'm sorry, Han—"

There was a knock.

"Come in."

Louis Chavasse entered. He greeted them with a smile on his dark face. "Hallo you de Witt's." He sat down heavily. "Well, that's been quite an afternoon."

"Where have you been?"

"Didn't you *know?* I've been to Draneth City, to one of their factories—to a furnace in fact, to see the plating go through the mills."

Han was amazed. "They invited you to go?"

Chavasse inclined his head. "Would I have stirred a yard off the site if they hadn't?"

"What did you see?" asked Han. His wife looked at him sharply; his tone seemed to say to her, clearly, that he felt the strangeness of this world, of something about it which did not belong to an earth-type planet.

"Nothing," said Chavasse. "I mean, nothing that was extraordinary. Oh, I went straight into the city, landed on a building top, met their scientists at the lab. They have one or two female scientists there, too. There was one, about thirty, reminded me of a girl in Montreal who—"

"Louis," reminded Leela.

He grinned. "Sorry. But I'm not the only one who thinks they're pretty nice. When I dropped in, just now, Carol was talking to one of the 'cops.' At a distance of course, but you know Carol. Well, anyway, we saw the lab, which was much like ours—one or two things different, nothing much—and then we flew in a big car to the mills and furnaces. Electric, like ours, cogging and rolling mills pretty much the same. Cleaner and faster, if anything. I saw all the tests on the plates they're doing for us. Good stuff. I gathered that there was a group of people there who would have liked to come out and *really* looked our ship over, but they're bound by regulations to keep away from us, even as we are from them."

"There wasn't anything that made the old animal in you rise up and howl 'danger'?" asked Leela.

He shook his head. "No. Not a thing." He looked curious. "Why? You on to something?"

"No. I was just saying to Han—oh, it's just my imagination,"

Light steps passed outside; a moment later came the thump of a closing door. Leela got up.

"I think that was Carol. I must see her for a moment." Moving with heavy care, she went out, to knock at a door on the opposite side of the passage.

"Hallo?" from inside.

"It's me, Carol. Leela. I wanted to talk to you about—"

As from habit, Doctor de Witt was opening the door as she spoke. She gasped when she saw that Carol was stripping off the remains of torn clothes. Obviously, she had run into the ship half naked. She was wild eyed.

Leela came in and closed the door. "What's this?"

The nurse was trying to recover her composure, but she could not decide whether to dress or examine her bruises first.

"Carol?"

Leela sat on the bed, her quiet beauty contrasting with the lush extravagance of her subordinate. She took Carol's hand.

"My fault," said the blonde, "my own damn fault. And I've no comeback. I hope Hunsecker doesn't ever get to know. I was just being pleasant to the cops—exchanging a joke, I suppose, you might say flirting, when two of them tried—well, to carry me of. And they thought it very funny, very funny indeed; I got loose from the brutes, but only just in time." She gave a shaky laugh. "They've got different standards from ours."

Leela did not let Carol see her amusement. But she was amused, even so. She went back and told Han, who was just saying goodbye to Louis Chavasse.

On hearing the story, Han was serious, at first, and then he too wanted to laugh.

"That will make her reserve her favours for those who know how to be grateful. Still, Hunsecker had better not hear of it."

"What if the cops report it? After all, that must be what they're here for."

"Maybe they won't. They were as much in the wrong as she." He turned to his wife, aware that his remark didn't necessarily make sense. "No—wait a minute—for all we know, that's their way with women."

She joined him at the direct port, looking out into the night. "You know, that's part of the trouble. We haven't the faintest idea of their social life, we don't know who

fits where, what the chain of command and responsibility is, what their families are like, their religion. Even their food is almost a complete mystery—what's that? "

Two navigation lights were glowing in the sky, coming rapidly nearer. When the flycar arrived overhead, it dropped swiftly down, then floated the last yard or so like thistledown. One of the cops came to the door, raising his hand in salute as the important arrival stepped down, followed by a slimmer figure.

"Was that— "

Han watched them go to the little hut which was Hunsecker's. "Yes. I think that that was Serema-Da."

"At this time of night? "

"They visit any time, it seems. But what's he come about? "

"Leela? "

"All the way from Draneth City? And would such an important man come to see about that? "

She shrugged. "That's what we don't *know*. We've no idea how they operate. You heard Chavasse; they look alike, and yet, for all we know, they may be different." She gave a little laugh. "For all we know, they may be fattening us for some kind of slaughter we couldn't even begin to imagine! "

The annunciator cut into the last few words of the foolish remark.

"Attention all officers. Please come at once to the conference hut. At once to the conference hut."

Han found a seat next to Chavasse.

"Leela not coming? Best not I suppose, now. That baby OK? "

"Yes. Yes, I think so." He glanced round the brightly lit room, listing the officers. Kisonga, as chief artificer, was usually there. He saw Crombie and Carel and Steiger and Karasawa and the rest, but not Kisonga.

They stood when Hunsecker entered. He was accompanied by Serema-Da, and a young Dranethan with red hair and a sharp, eager face. The latter carried a flat case; turret covers at one end seemed to show that it was a camera of some sort.

The chief motioned the two Dranethans to be seated. Han noted that the younger one did not sit down until the older was settled.

"Gentlemen," said the chief, "we are honoured by a visit from the president of the committee, Serema-Da . . ."

De Witt thought, it's late at night, for us, but Hunsecker knows better than to show it. The astrogator realised that his chief attitude was simply that if this was the Draneth game, then he and the *Dromio's* crew would play it.

". . . and what he has to say to you will, I think, please you." He turned to the leading Dranethan, waited for him to rise, and then sat down.

Now that Han got a second and longer look at Serema-Da, he found that, the more he gazed, the more baffling the man was. Handsome, middle aged, with lines of care upon his fine features, the impression created was one of extreme care, and worry, and sadness. It was as though he had lived many lifetimes, had seen the sorrows which could befall creation, and grieved for them all. Han felt—' this man has more care, and unhappiness, than any man I've ever seen. It is in his eyes, his face, in his every movement. *Why is his planet closed?* '

Serema-Da spoke. It was a beautiful voice, using what had come to be known as ' Mandarin Galactic,'—the purest form of that widely used language.

"Captain Hunsecker, and gentlemen. My visit here to you is to tell you, first of all, that my committee is very satisfied at the way you have observed the regulations which we had to impose upon you during your stay with us. From this arises a slight change of attitude, which I hope you will welcome. Those who have visited you during the past days have all been people of a certain standing, scientifically. During the visit this afternoon of your Mr. Chavasse to one of our plants, an incident occurred which changed our thinking. This young man"—he turned to the sharp, red haired fellow—"is of the Draneth City News Service. He was reporting the visit, with a still camera. Or, it should have been a still camera. Instead of that, however, he had with him his tv eye, and he reported the visit direct to his office. It was put out on the city news circuit. This was wrong, officially, but those who saw it said, ' why not? ' After all, our people have heard of you, though not officially. So we feel that if you grant this young man facilities to see your ship, and interview your people, it may be of use to both races."

Han was thinking, 'how can this man be a general dogsbody and come out on a footling trip like this?' He heard his voice saying, "But still, Serema-Da, this will remain a closed planet?"

He felt a stiffening of the men around him. So, they felt these differences of which Leela had been speaking. He dismissed the eerie sensation of hackles rising.

Serema-Da answered evenly. "Yes. It must remain so. We make the rules, Lieutenant de Witt." As though in reproof of the question, the Dranethan turned to Hunsecker. "I hope that you have had all the help you require?"

"Oh, certainly, certainly. I intend to put in a full report of your helpfullness to the Galactic Council, with a copy to you, of course. A year's delay would have meant psychological disaster for some of us."

Again that sad smile. "I understand. I have the feeling too." He saw the other's surprise, and added, "Dranethans come from the Kirila systems, you remember. Sometimes the burdens we bear are great, very great." He seemed lost in his own thoughts for a moment, and then gestured to the young man. "This is Imre-Ge, a complete news service in himself. Show him what you wish to show him, and nothing which you do not. He will find accommodation with the protectors and guardians." A smile. "Or must I say 'policemen'?"

The meeting was over. As Hunsecker shepherded the two Dranethans out, he beckoned to Han de Witt.

"Han, would you show Imre-Ge round?'

"Glad to." He touched hands with the young Dranthethan, exchanged greetings. They walked out into the floodlit night of the repair site.

Han said, "You'd better open with a shot of the chief, there, saying goodbye to Serema-Da—"

The reporter already had his headphones on, and his camera ready. "Hello, ready to record, Teg?" He crouched to get a good shot. "Ready here . . . This picture comes to you on Draneth City News Service, and it is a scoop. At the moment, you are watching the president of the committee saying goodbye to Earth spaceship captain John Hunsecker, leader of the first visitors this planet has known for many years. These inhabitants of Sol III, men like ourselves, were in trouble, and, for this reason a rule was broken which . . ."

Han watched the reporter at work, amused. He was like any young live wire newsman on any planet where humans existed. He photographed the departure, and then interviewed Hunsecker in a subtly flattering sort of way. Then he went into the recreation room, where various crewmen were sitting reading, or watching the video tapes.

" It's fairly late, now," said Imre-Ge. " I think I'd like to contact you tomorrow, and then I can do a full scale job here. There's really enough material for a dozen programmes, properly edited."

" Why not do it live? " asked Han.

" No—there are certain difficulties. We wouldn't want to do that."

Han knew that this was thin ice. He and the reporter strolled across the plateau, near the base of the ship.

" Certain difficulties? "

The Earthman was filled with a great desire to know more. And he had reproved Leela for the self same thing.

" Yes. We have our ways of doing things, we know which are good for our people, and which are not "— he stopped and stared. " Who is that? "

The man walking past, Han saw at a glance, was Kisonga.

" Hey, Dan."

Kisonga turned, and came up. " Hello."

Imre-Ge looked hard. " A new kind of man! That skin colour! May I interview him? I have never seen—."

Kisonga's face was hardly visible under the cap, and in the downthrown light. But his voice was clearly hostile.

" I don't *want* to be interviewed." He turned on his heel and went off.

Imre-Ge shrugged. " Must respect him, of course. Pity. Tell me about him."

Han started on the story of how, over hundreds of years, the once ' lower ' dark skinned man had achieved parity with the white. Imre-Ge, eager, took it all down on a pocket recorder, and asked endless questions, until Han began to get weary.

" Suppose that we make a start in the morning—." Han started to say. He stopped, because he thought he heard a whirring, quite distinct from the various hums which came from the ship.

" The morning. That will be very suitable." Imre-Ge touched hands. " Goodnight."

## Chapter Four

Though it was late, Han spent a long time in drowsy talk with Leela, before he felt the desire to sleep. He had forgotten about the meeting with the surly Kisonga. His mind was full of his coming son, and of his love for his wife. He could not describe his feelings when he heard the unborn babe's heart beating; he felt near to tears with happiness. He asked all his fussy husband questions again, and she answered them with amused calm.

"You think that it will be here, then?"

"I think so, Han. I've worked it out. It doesn't matter, does it?"

"No," he said, slowly, "it doesn't matter. I shall be glad to leave here, now. They've done a lot of good for us, but —no, I want to be off."

He told her about Imre-Ge.

"Do you want him to interview you? Can easily leave you out?"

"Don't know," she answered, drowsily. "I'll think about it—."

Then something happened which made Han leap out of bed. Someone, most probably the duty officer, sounded the general alarm. The clangour reverberated throughout the ship. Doors banged, and feet pounded on stairways. The annunciator broke into life with a spit, and they heard the voice of the duty officer, identifiable as Crombie.

"Man away. Man away. Chief Artificer Kisonga reported in Draneth City in stolen flier. Captain Hunsecker to control please!"

Leela sat up. "Oh, my God!"

Han said, "You stay where you are. This isn't your affair. You mustn't—."

"He was my responsibility! It must have come on him again, and he said nothing! Oh—"

"Leela! I order you to stay there! I don't care if fifty men break loose, the only thing that matters is you, and our son! Nothing's important beside that. *Nothing!* Please, stay where you are." He looked earnestly at her tender, troubled face.

She relaxed. "All right Han, I will if—"

"No ifs. I'll get into control, now, and see what's going on."

In control a group of officers stood round a screen. Karasawa was operating, his bland features giving no hint of his feelings.

Crombie was saying, " So when the op said that he had a general call from Draneth City, I had him see what it was. As soon as I heard Kisonga's name, I punched the button."

" Quite right." Hunsecker was there, grim, edgy. Chavasse was close behind him. " What came on? "

" Police. A picture of one of their cops, speaking. Said he'd come on again."

Karasawa said, " We'll have to wait, sir."

" You realise what this means? " growled Hunsecker. " One of our men has violated the terms they laid down. If they turn the heat on, we have no redress. What happened to Kisonga? Where's the doc? "

" You'll have to have it secondhand, sir. She's resting," said Han. Hunsecker looked at him very straightly, and saw a man ready to defend his mate.

" All right. Let's have Longmer in."

Crombie called her up in sick bay, and Hunsecker addressed her.

" What's the story on Kisonga? "

" It's the old trouble, sir. He was all right, until the newness wore off. My idea is that he came to realise that this was not his earth, or his sky, or his sun. It's the psychosis again. Only return to Earth can cure him."

" But you had him under sedation—! "

" He must have tricked us, somehow. Seemed to take the pills, but didn't really."

Hunsecker grunted and broke contact. He stared hungrily at the screen. " If it can't be proved that this man is not responsible for his actions, I'll break him, for good."

" Bah! " said Chavasse. He was looking angry. " Are we to sit here and see an Earthman condemned by these people? Kisonga's one of us! "

" Don't talk wild, Louis," said Hunsecker, sombrely.

" Men like Dan don't grow on trees. Whatever they want to do with him, tell them we want him back! "

The chief engineer's words were disturbing. His eyes gleamed. Hunsecker started to reply, but a flicker from the screen stopped him. The sound blurted.

The head and shoulders of a tough looking Dranethan appeared.

" Captain Hunsecker? "

"Here."

"You have heard about your man being in the city. First, please explain how this could have happened."

Hunsecker told the policeman about the mental trouble of Kisonga. Han noted that there was no sympathy for the plight of the fugitive, as there had been from Serema-Da. Why?

"H'm. My name is Akran-Me, by the way. I hold the equivalent Earth rank of colonel. Your man landed a flier, rather clumsily, at one of the parks in the centre of the city. He was noticeable, first because of his skin, and secondly because he did not have his parking clip. He ran, when questioned. I must confess that I do not understand his motives. He *is* a human, like ourselves?"

"Of course. His skin colour makes no difference."

Colonel Akran-Me nodded, but he still looked doubtful. "If you say so. Now, we cannot have him here. At the moment, I am having all open and park areas searched, most thoroughly. I will show you the progress of this search, as well as I can."

The picture blurred out.

"He doubts that Dan Kisonga is a human!" said Chavasse. "And how does he know that Kisonga must be in one of the parks or open areas?"

"You see," growled Hunsecker, "we're in their hands. They call the tune. It must be so—"

"Up to a point," muttered Chavasse.

"May I help?" asked a voice. Imre-Ge was standing at the back of the group.

"Now see here," began Crombie, feeling his position as duty man. "You can't—"

"I can help, Captain Hunsecker," said Imre-Ge. "I know what they're going to do—I saw it on the repeater screen in the police quarters. If they use Dranethan, instead of Galactic, I can interpret."

"Why should you want to?" asked Hunsecker, bluntly.

"I have my reasons," replied the young reporter. "May I come closer, please?"

He came closer, as a chatter of language broke from the speaker.

"That was a patrolman in one of the parks, saying that he could see no trace of the Earthman," translated Imre-Ge.

Han wondered—what's this boy's line? What is he after, doing this for us? Is he just being good-hearted?

More Dranethan from the speaker, clipped sounds, like commands, and then a couple of long sentences.

" What was that, Imre-Ge? "

" Negative reports from most of the parks. Then someone at police control said that he must be on or near one of the streets."

Then sound was cut off, as well as vision. Hunsecker cursed. He turned to the Dranethan.

" What will they do to him? "

" Return him to you, I believe."

" Is that certain? "

Imre-Ge's laugh was cynical. " What is certain? With Serema-Da and some of his friends, who can be certain of anything? "

Hunsecker said to Karasawa, " Keep trying." He turned back to the Dranethan. " You sound as though you don't like your government."

Imre-Ge looked at the Earthmen, steadily. Hunsecker returned that stare. Chavasse, who had slipped out, returned with a flask of spirit and some plastic shot glasses.

" Any objection, sir? "

Hunsecker seemed to have an idea. Han wondered if this respected man, who had stuck to the letter and spirit of the law for so long, was thinking that, perhaps, a little more knowledge might come in handy, and that here was a source to hand.

" Let's have a shot each. Let him try one too," he added.

" A kind of wine? " asked Imre-Ge.

" You could say that," answered Chavasse, passing a glass.

Imre-Ge took it, and sipped it.

" What is it called? "

" Scotch." The Earthmen were glancing at one another. Dranethan law did not forbid hospitality—and that's what Imre-Ge was getting, along with a looser tongue.

" You were saying," said Han, " that there is some dislike of your present rulers. They have treated us well; why do you dislike them? "

Imre-Ge's face, so like that of an Earthman, yet held an expression which seemed totally alien. He said, " It is hard to say. But there is a movement among us, which is called the ' Whole Truth ' movement. It is only a whispering here and there, but it does exist. There are a lot of news service men in it. You see, on the face of it, this should be a happy

civilisation. The planet is rich, we are developing it fine. We live according to our natures, and yet . . . This is difficult. There are some of us who do not think that our natures are as they should be. It's—"

The speaker crackled, the screen showered a blaze of colour, and there was a picture of a street in Draneth City. The picture grew until the centre of interest was what looked like a kind of bar, or restaurant. A number of good looking, simply dressed people were crowding round it. Police were sending them away by waving hands at them; little violence was used.

Colonel Akran-Me's voice spoke. "This was the trouble. The Earthman got into a bar where the scanners were out of action. It is reported that he has been there some time, complaining about the drinks, and carrying on a tirade about being not wanted anywhere, and using words of Galactic to describe things and conditions of life which his listeners did not understand. . . "

From the bar came a number of Dranethans, male and female. They lined up, quite passively outside the place. Three long roadcars, like low blue lorries, drew up, with police back and front. The Dranethans walked into these, and were driven off. There was still no sign of Kisonga.

"What was that about, Imre-Ge? "

The reporter, flushed with his second whisky, replied, "They are being taken for slight re-education."

"H'm? " If the young Dranethan had not been under the influence of alcohol, he would have noticed the attitudes of rigid, almost hostile attention among those near him.

"They have been in conflict with a bad influence. Occasionally a person may be classified as a bad influence, and he will be re-educated, and those who have come into contact with him. Now, those people in the bar have met Kisonga, so—"

Chavasse exclaimed, "Listen! That policeman said that the scanners in the bar where Kisonga was were out of action. How many scanners are there, and where are they placed? "

"There are scanners everywhere. That is how we live. It is right that they should be, isn't it? Or do you think differently? Oh, it is rumoured, that on the home planets, which we have never seen, this is not so. But here, that is the usual

thing." He was not conscious of their horrified stares. Unstrapping his camera, he added, "May I report back while you are here? This is not forbidden?"

Hunsecker nodded. The screen still showed the outside of the bar, from which the crowds had now dispersed.

Han breathed, "Scanners everywhere. Their lives supervised. Re-education. And they say they're democratic . . ."

Imre-Ge was talking into his little mike, speaking in Dranethan. He said to the *Dromio* officers, "Please talk naturally. I am reporting, the blame is mine, if there is any . . ."

On the screen, even as Imre-Ge raised his camera, there appeared a number of police leaving the bar. With them, passive, his head hanging down, was Dan Kisonga. He had lost his cap, and he seemed dejected. The police held him lightly. They stood at the edge of the sidewalk, signalling a car.

Suddenly, Kisonga broke loose, sending a couple of the police spinning. Before the others could recover, he was away, running, running like a hare, twisting and turning and dodging. On the screen rose a wild babble of Dranethan, sounds of anger and confusion. And as the fugitive ran, he was constantly within the range of another, and yet another scanner. It was as Imre-Ge said, there were scanners everywhere. Anyone, within the limits of the city at least, was in the eye of one of them. Hundreds of years earlier a man named Orwell had written a book . . .

Kisonga was still running. They could see his mouth open, and knew that he was shouting, but only the babble of Dranethan came from the speaker. Scanner after scanner took him in, followed him, and then transferred his picture to the next, while the watchers felt deep animal fears pulling at them when they saw one of their own kind hunted so.

"What are they saying, those voices?" asked Han de Witt.

The reporter was using his camera on the screen, for a lot of the time, and it occurred to Han that this was how he was getting news through which normally his organisation might never receive. He said, "There is someone there who is urging that uncreation may be necessary—"

So, they could kill, thought Han! With all Serema-Da's smooth ways, when it came to the point . . .

A policeman on an intersection tried to stop Kisonga, but the Earthman felled him with a single punch. It almost looked as though Kisonga knew the way he wanted to go. Like the rest, Han was tense with excitement and mounting anger. A hand was laid on his arm, and he found Leela there, with Carol Longmer beside her. They stared at the screen.

Another scanner flicked on. It showed the section of street where the car park was.

"That's it!" cried Chavasse, "he's going to get out the way he came!"

"Not if they shoot first!" said Hunsecker, grimly, "and they can if they want!"

Kisonga ran into the park, threw himself at a flycar, and got in. His pursuers were twenty yards after him, giving him enough time to rise clear of them. Ten feet, twenty, thirty, forty, the scanner followed his upward climb. Fifty feet—and from somewhere below a long thin flash of blue cut the night; a glow appeared round the car, it swayed, and then plummeted down to the ground.

And the picture switched off.

For a moment there was no sound from the watchers. Leela sobbed. Carol took one arm, and Han the other. Imre-Ge, still reporting, took them in the eye of his camera.

Leela moaned. "My fault, my fault! I was too occupied with my baby. I'm a lousy doctor. That was my fault—mine—"

"You're not to say that," said Han.

Hunsecker was growling, "We've no complaint. We're here on sufferance—"

Chavasse was livid with anger. "We just saw an innocent man killed, and you say we can do nothing!"

"Shall we take on the whole planet, Louis?"

(Imre-Ge was reporting on Leela and Carol).

"We can at least let your high and mighty Galactic Council know what a filthy thing these—"

"Don't talk like a fool! The Council would back the Dranethans to the hilt . . ."

Imre-Ge said, "I have not seen her before. Is she your doctor, then?"

"Yes," said Han, "but she is resting, these days, because of her child. Come on, Leela. There's nothing for you to do."

Louis Chavasse came forward. "Don't worry, doc—"

Imre-Ge repeated Han's last few words. He asked, "May I have just a few words, please? This is quite important."

"Listen," said Chavasse, sharply, "one of our men has just been killed. We don't like it, even though there's nothing we can do about it. Why don't you leave it until later?"

Imre-Ge seemed to take the advice. Even before Leela was out of the control room, he was hugging a small mike to his mouth, and talking nineteen to the dozen in Dranethan.

Carol said that she would see Leela back to the cabin. Han, turning into the room from the door, saw Karasawa signal again. Once more they came to the screen.

"There's speech on here," he said, "just a minute."

Colonel Akran-Me's face appeared. He looked serious.

"Captain Hunsecker?"

"I'm here."

"We regret that we had to reduce your man to uncreation."

Han de Witt had to admire his chief; despite all the strain, Hunsecker was clinging to the principle of law.

"All right, colonel. Let's not waste time over it. It's for you to say."

Han heard Chavasse snort.

"Thank you, captain. I must tell you that no report of this will appear in Draneth City, or anywhere else in the planet. We will arrange it."

Han wondered about the reports that Imre-Ge's camera must have sent to his own office. What of that? Was there censorship? Did everything filter through the police net? There was a tight hold on the people here, if the number of scanners was anything to go by.

Chevasse grunted as the police colonel broke contact. "Couldn't we get in touch with the boss, Serema-Da? My God—all that was wrong with Kisonga was that he longed for home. Don't we all."

"Don't we all," echoed Hunsecker. Suddenly, he looked older than his fifty years. "No. We're in the wrong. We're aliens on a closed planet. And I don't even want to know *why* it's closed." His shoulders sagged. "Let's all go to bed, shall we?"

Han did not know how long he had slept. He woke, feeling heavy, and the hand on his shoulder continued to shake him.

"Wake up de Witt, wake up!" The voice spoke Galactic.

"H'n?"

"It is I, Imre-Ge. I did not go to bed. I found a place on the scaffolding round the tail, where the police here would not look for me. There I spent some time sending in a report on our news service. There are others on our news service who think as I do. I saw the police come out as a flycar arrived, just after they had put your watchers and guards to sleep." The words babbled out in a stream. The young man was so excited that he could not tell what to say first. "Then they stole into the ship. I know where their flycar—a big one—went to. I can tune in on this apparatus of mine. It is illegal. I can help you—I know—quickly—I believe that—"

"Stop!" Han sat up and grasped his arm. "What's all this about?"

"They have a centre, a place where they go. I am not supposed to know about it. I should be uncreated if they ever found out. But there are many who think as I do, who demand to know, and this may be a chance. Oh, if we can get there at once, and make sure—"

Han slapped his face.

"Say what you mean!"

"Your doctor—the lady—of whom you were so careful, they took her!"

Han de Witt leaped from his bed, and took one look at where Leela should have been. For perhaps ten seconds, his mind was filled with a red, terrible rage, and a flaming desire to kill, rend, rip to pieces and utterly destroy anyone who gave the slightest opposition. Leela! They had taken Leela, and the son who was so near to separate life! She had said that it might be tonight!

With a great effort, he controlled himself. He spoke quietly.

"Where is this?"

"It is a place where only the ruling committee go. I am not supposed to know—"

"*You must take me there!*"

"Listen, do as I say. First, put the guards out of action. Cut off their communications too. Then take a flycar—one of theirs. It is about a hundred kilometres. I know. I may lose my life doing this but it will be in a just cause. I feel it—"

Han held a blaster in his hand. He strapped it on, panting, raging again, but cool at the same time. Leela, Leela, Leela! throbbed his brain. My son, my son!

He left the ship at a speed which put Imre-Ge twenty yards behind him. He kicked open the hut door of the guards, or police, or whatever they liked to call themselves. Four shots of his blaster, set at 'stun,' settled them. A twist of the dial, and another shot, and a blue flame wrecked their communications gear. Then he was out, and running for a flycar. Imre-Ge slammed in with him, hardly able to get into a seat before the agile craft shot into the deep night.

"North west by north on the gyro, until you see the river below. Follow up where the tributary comes from the mountains. There you will see the centre."

*Closed planet, closed planet, galactic law!* jeered Han's whirling mind. *They took her away, they took her away! I'll get her away if I kill a hundred!*

"Why did they take her?" he asked Imre-Ge. "Oh, stop babbling into that thing! Why did they take her away?"

"It is hard to say. I think I know, though the reason seems incredible to me. But, all the evidence points to my theory. And I must know."

Breathing heavily, with his lips drawn back from his strong teeth, Han de Witt watched the gyro compass.

"I suppose what I'm doing is against the Galactic Law. OK. What they're doing is against it, too. It has to be!" He snorted with anger. "H'm. Theory? What theory?"

"Perhaps," said Imre-Ge, "if I could ask some questions—"

"You're sure that this is where she'll be?"

"If my theory is correct, that is where she will be. And I shall be uncreated for what I have done. Please, my questions—"

Han's mind felt racked and strained. But there was something about the earnest young Dranethan's manner which appealed to him. For all his assurance, there was something *lost* about him.

"Ask away, then."

And Imre-Ge began to ask questions. Han de Witt was startled at them, but he kept on answering, piecing together answers to his own questions from those put to him by Imre-Ge.

"You see," said the reporter, "what they forgot was that a closed planet is, in real truth, an impossibility. There are people with long range radios, and sub-etherics, even. Forbidden by law, but that gets broken. But we could not spread the truth, until tonight. Now, all you have said has been

received by those who will know what to do with it. They cannot re-educate all of us. Perhaps they will simply uncreate— "

He broke off, and pointed down at the pale ribbon which wound into the larger one.

" There. Now, follow upstream. You will see the lights soon."

Han said, through clenched teeth, " You'd better be right." He patted the blaster, and the spare charges. " Will they have guards? "

" It is possible that they will not. Take the car down about a hundred yards north of the farthest light. I think I know where we may find them, and your lady."

Han set the car down on to a stretch of grass. He stepped out. The buildings were low and flat, having no more than one story. Broad balconies were visible.

" Now, where? Don't make any mistake! "

" This one." Imre-Ge pointed. " Let us get up on to that balcony. I am sure that will be the one. I can feel it."

Han took him at his word. They crossed the grass and went through the shrubs which had been made to bloom in this desert area. A curious thought occurred to him, then. There were no night noises. No insects, no animals, no birds. He could not remember there being any other living things on Draneth except humans.

" Up here." He went up the broad outside stairway and approached a lighted window, flattening himself against the wall as he edged up to it.

Then he looked inside. Imre-Ge was behind him.

Fear and rage gripped Han de Witt again. Leela was there, and with her, standing close to her as she lay on a white couch, were three men. He was on the point of breaking the window and shooting them down, when something stopped him, and he looked again.

He was looking into a small, superbly equipped operating theatre. The men were clad in white. By their actions, their calm, it was communicated to Han that they knew what they were doing, and he knew what they were.

They were doctors.

They were not going to hurt Leela. Quite the reverse.

Trembling, unmindful of the quiet hum of Imre-Ge's camera recording everything, Han de Witt, astrogator of the

*Dromio*, watched the birth of his son. He saw how calm the doctors were, how relaxed Leela seemed. Now that the child was born, she seemed to sleep. The doctors treated the babe with all possible care and Han felt that he wanted to weep. He could have wept, not only with relief, but also for almost every living soul on Draneth.

When Serema-Da's voice spoke to him from behind, he started, and pulled his blaster forward in a reflex action. The sight of the president's sad face told him that he would not need the weapon.

"Come inside, Han de Witt," said Serema-Da.

Serema-Da led him to a white, shining room, where Leela lay on a couch. She smiled at him.

"Han, what happened? I was just going to tell you that the baby was near, when I was taken out?"

She answered his stream of questions. Yes, of course she was all right. Yes, they were perfect, the doctors. She was absolutely first class. So was the baby. But why . . .

Serema-Da, his face grave and careworn, and his voice without that resonance which had previously made it so compelling, began to speak. Han looked round for Imre-Ge. He was not to be seen. As Serema-Da went on, he was joined by other men, among them the doctors who had attended Leela.

"You see in me, Han de Witt, an idealistic fool, leader of a group of idealistic fools, who may, perhaps, be treated as criminals, in the eyes of the Galactic Council. But we did not start out as criminals, and we have not ended as such."

De Witt sat down by his wife, holding her hand. She would see the baby later. He felt his mind gripped by what he knew was coming. Serema-Da and his followers had tried to do something that was past terror.

"We are of the Kirilan One and Two systems, my followers and I. We needed to expand, to colonise, but our people bred slowly. Then a group of scientists, myself among them, discovered how to create intelligent life. Androids which were as men, except for one vital thing. They could not reproduce their own kind. Think of the contradiction here. Beautiful, warm, eager, intelligent beings, who were denied one of the basic sources of human dignity, and happiness—the supreme joy of bringing forth their own children. But, having started the project, we continued. There were other political pressures

brought to bear. You see how well we succeeded, with our factories, with our whole technology.

"You cannot imagine, either, how far we failed. Think, if you can, of the deception involved, to the beings which we created and shipped here whole and adult. What an altering of outlook, what, indeed. What a crippling of so many things which real humans, such as you or I, take for granted. Imagine the supervision, the lies and evasion which had to be built into their natures, the twisting of what you know to be good and sane and moral. There have no doubt been incidents of which you have heard which did not seem to have any explanation. Now, perhaps, the explanation is clear. And because the beings were so good in many ways, we ran the risks of the secret of their non human-ness being discovered, even as you saw with that young reporter. Kisonga—how I regret his death—had been telling of his family in that bar . . . " He laughed bitterly. "And we tried to make it a closed planet.

"I have been so terribly wrong. Firstly, I should not have agreed to making this experiment at all. It is against the will of nature. Secondly, I should have resisted the human desire to help humans, when you came into orbit here. Thirdly, I should have kept you under *constant* supervision. When Imre-Ge sent the reportage about the ship, and your wife, I panicked. I had to get your wife away from where she might be interviewed, but all that was to no avail. Imre-Ge could not be found, and his mouth stopped, and he continued to report. Now, the news is everywhere. The people of Draneth know that they are not human. They have the terrible shock of finding that they are scientist's creatures. It is the end. The end."

Leela asked softly, "What will you do?"

"After I have seen to the uncreation of Draneth City and all other centres of habitation, I shall return to the Kirilan system, for my punishment. Perhaps I shall not be punished. I don't know. There is no life, or progress here, now. All that is over. Humans have so many deep springs to their behaviour. If one of those springs is missing, man is vain and foolish to think that he can arrange substitutes. It cannot be done."

There was a pause. One of the doctors came in, and placed the swathed baby beside its mother.

Han looked, and he knew joy; in that same moment, he felt the anguish of Draneth, of the people who inhabited the third

planet of the far Kindros system.

"I will send a message to your ship. You may speak to them, and assure them that you are safe."

"Thank you," said Han, holding Leela's hand.

Leela asked, "Serema-Da, will it remain a closed planet, now?"

"Who can tell?" His voice was deeply weary. "Why do you ask?"

"You could ask the Galactic Council to consider men from So III as colonists."

He smiled, and came near, caressing the baby's head.

"Maybe, maybe. Perhaps, Han and Leela de Witt, when your ship lifts away, you will remember the lesson of Draneth. And perhaps you can tell those of your people who belong to that faith—what is it, Christianity?—that man should never try to play God. We know."

—John Kippax

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*Centuries later another " thin red line " found themselves trapped by an enemy, with only one remedy—to go forward.*

# THE THIN RED LINE

## by NOEL BADDOW POPE

Lieutenant Steele, his eyes as steel-blue as his name, looked through the cockpit cover, frantically searching, all the time looking and searching.

" Keep your eyes on the screen Number One," he said sharply to MacDonald, the Communication Officer, navigator, and 2 I/C.

" Sorry, sir," MacDonald said, reverting his eyes from the terrain below to the screen in front of him.

" You damn well have to have eyes in the back of your head to see these damned aliens," Steele growled, his mouth grim and set, " the screen's our only hope."

Steele was flying the ship as low as he dared, literally skimming the tree tops. His cargo was urgent and precious ; Commando reinforcements that were being rushed to a danger point of a break through by the Vhazas. Already the Vhazas had nearly encircled part of the main force, dented the line to near breaking point. If they broke through ? He shuddered at the thought, knowing that it would be the end of the small foothold the Earth Forces had on the planet Lannion.

Forces that were stretched to the limit. The ship he was commanding was long due for the scrap yard, an old cargo-cum-passenger transport that had been hastily converted to Interstellar Command. Its name the *Yorkshire* was still visible under the Command insignia.

Both he and MacDonald were heavy fleetmen, not ferry pilots of old crocks. A fleet that was now undermanned, the *Yorkshire* hadn't a full crew, not even an Engineer Officer. The troops were thin on the ground. It was an emergency of the first order to hold Lannion.

A planet that was a deep indigo colour in the early morning light. Turning to a violet and mauve as its sun rose in the deep blue sky. At mid-day the sun was a blue white, like hot metal, that burnt the eyes as its fierce rays turned the planet into violets and greys.

Steele swore again as he looked down at the tree tops, shrub and tall grass now all turning to a light violet as the sun's rays flickered over the landscape.

" See anything ?" he demanded, a light sweat gleaming on his lean face as he stared into the deep indigo shadows under the hills, and in the valleys.

" No !" MacDonald said grimly. " It's nearly impossible to see these bloody swine, even on the screen. They're almost like chameleons, the way they blend into the landscape. Can't you go faster ?"

" No !" Steele snapped. " We touch down in less than a minute. I'm not over-shooting the mark."

" Anyway," MacDonald grinned, " we should be too low for their heavy shock-wave guns."

" I wouldn't bet on that," Steele said seriously, screwing up his eyes, his bared teeth showing white against his bronze tan, as he looked and looked again for the danger he knew was there. For a second he fought to control his nerves, fought to push the thought from his mind.

As he shook his head to clear his mind, he saw the flash. Instinctively he flung the craft into a tight turn. " Guns fore and aft !" he roared through the intercom.

The craft gave a slight quiver as the gun crew went into action even before his orders. Then a violent shudder as the shock blast hit the craft.

For a split second the craft appeared to hang motionless, then it started to spin round and round like a falling leaf.

" Emergency stations," Steele ordered into the intercom, as he fought to gain control. He snapped the main jets off, and opened the port pilot jet to try and counter-balance the spin of the ship ; even then he knew it was hopeless.

" Screen Number One," he barked.

" Bloody hopeless," MacDonald said with forced calm. " I can't hold it steady, even if I do see somewhere to land."

Steele knew it also. He flicked the landing rockets on to radar control, his hands tight as he touched the switch.

The ship, ripping through the tree tops, steadied slightly as the blast from the rockets held it.

With a final, desperate chance, Steele opened the port jet to full blast, then cut it as he saw the light shrub steady beneath the ship.

There was a second of utter silence as the radar cut the rockets. Then a shriek of metal on stone. A violent pitching that shot Steele's head back in his seat. MacDonald, his eyes wide, gripped the arms of his seat with his body tense.

Small shrub, flying earth and stone flew over the cockpit.

Then there was an utter silence again.

" Out !" Major Stevens' voice cracked like a whip throughout the craft. " On the double." The doors were flung open as Commandos tumbled out of the cabins, running, deploying round the ship as the Major barked orders.

Steele scrambled out with MacDonald behind him. He gave a sigh of relief as he ran his hand through his blonde hair. MacDonald breathing heavily leant against the polished metal.

" Put your helmets on, you two," Major Stevens snapped as he strode up.

Steele hesitated as he looked at the thick-set, heavily built man. The jowl that showed blue-black even when Stevens had shaved.

" On the ground I'm in command," the Major continued. " In the air it's all yours, and what a bloody mess you made of that."

" Well—sir—" Steele hesitated.

" Your guns are radar controlled aren't they ?" the Major spat the words out. " Why the hell didn't you hit them first ?"

" They're difficult to see—"

" Of course they're difficult. We all know that, you know the orders," Stevens snapped. " Why the hell didn't you obey them ? You've endangered my men. I'll have your guts for garters when we get back." Stevens' dark eyes narrowed. " If we get back ?"

" I was obeying orders, sir," Steele replied, the anger rising in him.

" Shoot first, ask questions after, those are the orders," Stevens snapped. " If you obeyed that, what the bloody hell are we doing here. Not only haven't we reinforced the main body, we're now cut off and want help ourselves. And you know as well as I do, there just isn't any."

" Sir," Captain Harris, a thin, tall man interrupted, " everyone's in position, and the scouts are ready."

The major swung round. " Right !" he snapped. " I'll check." Then he strode away with determined strides.

" What's the drill now ?" MacDonald asked, as he took a cigarette and handed one to Steele.

" We'll also check," Steele answered, slowly inhaling the smoke and looking around.

The situation, he knew, could hardly be worse. They had landed in a small clearing of violet shrub. Around them were woods of trees ranging from a deep indigo to a pale mauve colour. The grass, dry and brittle, a bluey grey. Outcrops of jagged rocks and small mounds. In the middle, laying like a naked child, was the craft open to attack.

As the two walked to the stern of the ship, the air crew hesitated, and then followed them.

" Sir," the gunner chief said, " we were on automatic. We fircd immediately the screen picked them up."

" All right—" Steele said slowly, then stopped and took a deep breath as he saw the damage.

A great gash in the metal, like a knife cut, had torn away the mountings and cross structures of the main jet-tube. It was now nearly at right angles to its original position.

" Good God !" MacDonald whispered. " No wonder we were going round and around. We can never use that again." He took off his helmet, scratched his ginger hair and looked inquiringly at Steele.

" No," Steele said grimly, his thoughts racing, " but we might cut it out."

" Cut it out ?"

" Yes," Steele said quietly, " literally cut it right out. Then fly on the pilot-jets. We might just make it. It's not more than a mile or so to the main forces."

" We'd be like a duck with no wings."

" Not quite," Steele said firmly, " we'd just be airborne. I'll report to the Major. Get out the cutter and all the tools ready to start work."

Now that Steele had made up his mind, he hurried over to the small bluff where the Major had set up a command post. MacDonald gave orders to the air crew and ran after him.

" Then cut it out !" the Major snapped, when Steele told him of the slender chance. " And be quick about it."

Sergeant Brandon, a short stocky man, came in on the double before Steele had time to leave. His face was glistening with sweat, his lungs panting for breath.

" The scouting party can't get through, sir," he gasped. " The Vhazas are in between us and the main body."

" How many and how far away ?" the Major snapped.

" Not many, sir, but it's difficult to say. They're about half a mile away."

With the Sergeant's words came the bark of a shock-wave gun. As they all flung themselves flat on the ground, another gun barked.

" Get moving," Stevens ordered. " There's only one or two of them. I'll try and get them, or at least pin them down before they bring up others."

" Some bloody hope !" MacDonald grunted between breaths, running alongside Steele, as the two dodged back to the craft. " These blasted Vhazas seem to have X-ray eyes. Now let's see what the Major can do against them."

Steele just caught a glimpse of the troops squirming forward. Some taking a short run to fall flat behind whatever they could find. Others wriggling forward on their stomachs. Then he was at the craft, giving his own orders for the desperate repairs.

" It's a big chance, but the only one, so we'll take it," he said grimly.

" We'll cut out the main jet-tube completely. Cut out all the girders and cross struts, re-weld and brace across again."

" But," MacDonald said sharply, " if we do that the cross-struts and girders will be very near the two pilot-jets on each side. They'll become too hot, might even melt."

" It's a chance we'll have to take," Steele said determinedly. " We haven't far to go. We'll use the heat-resisting paint and hope for the best. Come on let's get busy."

There was a silence, except for the odd oath, as they worked with determination, and as quickly as they could in the cramped space of the hull of the craft.

Inside, Hastings, a crewman with the cutter, was panting for breath, sweat rolling off his body, saturating his overalls, making them dark with moisture and cling to his body.

Steele, like the others, had taken off his equipment and helmet, and was ripping away the cross struts, ready to lever the tube and girders out of the craft.

Then they were all cursing, grunting, heaving and pulling to free the jet-tube. With a final effort it was released, taken out of the craft and rolled on the ground.

" Let's have a breather !" MacDonald panted.

" There s not time," Steele said firmly. " Come on ! Let's have these cross-struts welded together ready to fit back into position again."

" That shouldn't take long, sir," Hastings said, picking up the welder and going to work.

" Get the spray gun and red heat-resisting paint," Steele ordered. " Make it quick, then we'll get to hell out of here."

But Steele spoke too soon. The Vhazas opened up an attack. Blasts from shock waves cracked over their heads, in front of the craft and in the tree tops, sending down showers of branches, twigs and leaves.

" Over there, in that gulley," Steele snapped the order. " Bring the cross struts, spray gun, and take cover."

The crew needed no second bidding. They all dived for the small dip in the ground on the double, dragging the cross-struts with them. MacDonald, carrying the spray gun, started work as he slithered to a stand still. He worked quickly, and it was only seconds before the cross-structure stood wet and gleaming red in the bright sunshine.

Steele picked up a wrench, turned to the crew and said firmly, " Get ready to run back with it. We'll refix it as soon as it's dry."

The startled, staring wide eyes of Hastings spun him round to look in the same direction.

The crested helmet of a Vhaza could be seen over a small shrub. Then the reptillian face, the large, dark eyes darting quickly from side to side. The flat nostrils opening and closing, like gills with each breath.

Automatically Steele's hand went down to feel for his gun. Then he swore, they had all dropped their gun belts near the craft when they started working on the repairs. He swore again when he realised that he hadn't left the gun crews in position.

The same thought must have entered one of the gunner's minds. He broke away and raced back to the ship.

The Vhaza broke cover and ran forward, coming straight towards them.

Steele and the rest dived for cover under the shrubs as the Vhaza brought his gun forward to aim.

The bark from the gun dropped the running gunner with a muffled scream.

Steele peered from under the shrub, to see the Vhaza running straight towards the gleaming red cross struts.

He expected the Vhaza to leap over the structure, but the Vhaza didn't. He fell sprawling over the cross struts, tumbled on his back, the gun flying from his hand, and then a look of utter amazement came over the Vhaza's face.

For a split second Steele and the Vhaza stared straight into each other's eyes. Then Steele leapt forward, his arm swinging, his hand gripping the wrench.

It was all in one movement, the wrench cracked on the side of the Vhaza's neck before his arm could come up in defence, before Steele's feet even touched the ground. The Vhaza's head jerked side-ways with a broken neck, the eyes slowly closing.

At the same time Steele's brain was nearly exploding with the thought.

" Number One !" he yelled. " Spray me all over with the red paint."

" What ! Sir ?" MacDonald said, startled with the idea. " Your—"

" Do as I say," Steele ordered, already covering his hands with paint and smearing his face, " from top to toe."

MacDonald scrambled up, a puzzled look on his face as he stared at the figure of the Vhaza laying on the ground, and then back to Steele.

" For God's sake hury up !" Steele snapped, covering his eyes with his hands.

He was sprayed from top to toe, a gleaming red, unreal figure, that shone like a beacon on a dark night. He picked up the Vhaza's gun, sprayed it red, and raced over to the Major.

" You bloody fool !" Stevens exploded, as he looked at the red apparition. " Have you gone stark raving mad ?"

" No sir," Steele said firmly, " I just don't think the Vhazas can see red."

" See red—" Stevens spluttered in anger. " You blasted idiot, you stand out like a sentinel, you can be seen for miles."

" Sir," Steele replied, " everything on this planet is blue, indigo or violet.

" There are no colours from the other end of the spectrum on this planet. No reds, orange or yellow. Red is alien to the Vhazas. The Vhazas' eyes just can't pick up the red end of the spectrum."

The Major paused, deep in thought, a frown on his face, as Steele quickly explained how the Vhaza had fallen over the red structure.

" Perhaps—?" Stevens said slowly. " Or it may have been one that was punch-drunk with fighting. But what about the craft ? Is that workable yet ?"

" We're nearly surrounded," Steele said quickly. " Even if we do get it airborne it'll only crawl. They'll knock us off with their light arms."

" And we're cut off," Stevens grunted.

" What are our chances ?"

" Slender," the Major said. " We've just got to fight it out."

" Then our only chance would be if one of us could get through to the main body," Steele said eagerly.

" That's no use, we can't expect help. We're reinforcements. We all have to get through."

" Then I'll try, sir. See if it works ?" Steele said stubbornly, wishing he hadn't been so over-eager with his words.

" It's a big chance, but our only one," the Major said slowly, looking Steele straight in the eyes. " And you're really looking for trouble."

" Well—somebody has to do it," Steele said, his nerves taut. " I'll attack and then you can see for yourself."

" I hope you're right," Stevens said grimly.

Steele more than hoped he was right as he dodged quickly forward from bush to bush. His mind racing, his nerves tense. Then he stopped, his heart thudding against his ribs.

To his right were two crouching Vhaza, to his left three more. Their eyes were staring straight ahead, they didn t even look at

him, not even when his finger pushed the button and he blasted the two groups with their own shock gun.

Steele hesitated, as a nervous tingle of excitement swept through his body. Then he darted back to Stevens.

" It works, sir!" he said, with a grin.

" So I gather," Stevens said drily. He slapped Steele on the shoulder, his lips curling into a slow smile.

" I've already ordered all troops to be sprayed red. They're doing it now, section by section. Then we'll attack."

Even as he spoke the first section of red troops squirmed forward. Then the next and the next.

There was a high pitched vibration in the air as the bewildered Vhaza tried to defend themselves from something they couldn't see. They just didn't know what it was all about.

After the message to the main forces another tongue of red slowly advanced, and joined up with Steven's group.

Slowly the thin red line crept forward over the planet as the Vhaza were swept from Lannion.

—Noel Baddow Pope

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*Pirate or patriot—the implication was applied entirely from the viewpoint of the protagonists.*

# BY IMPLICATION

## by BERTRAM CHANDLER

Mulvaney had the morning watch.

There was, of course, no morning—Time in Deep Space is no more than the movement of the hands around the chronometer dial—but the sea routine adopted by the interplanetary ships has brought with it its own maritime terminology.

Mulvaney, then, had the four hour spell of control room duty between 0400 hours and 0800 hours G.M.T. Mulvaney was bored. Mulvaney was irked by the pressure of his seat belt against the beginnings of a paunch, this same paunch having been distended, more than a little, by the copious draughts of black coffee that he had swigged from the dispenser since taking over. Mulvaney amused himself by devising ingenious and appropriate physical torments for whatever Commission's official had decreed that watch officers, at all times, were to remain strapped in their chairs. He did not play with the idea of unstrapping himself, however ; he was too good a spaceman for that. A man floating at ease in Free Fall loses precious seconds before he is able to do all the things that he should do in an emergency. And Mulvaney knew that officers who disregarded even the most foolish seeming regulations had a way of finishing up messily dead.

Mulvaney ran a hand through his thinning, sandy hair, then used the same hand to rub his somewhat faded, but keen, blue eyes. He fished a pack of cigarettes out of the breast pocket of

his uniform shirt, puffed one of the fat cylinders into ignition. He stared through the spiralling smoke at the vista displayed in the forward viewports. There, although not directly ahead, was the Sun, its brilliance tempered by the polarisation. There, a little to one side of the blazing primary, was a tiny, bright disc, a disc that had to one side of it a point of light. It was Earth, and its little companion was the Moon. Venus was out of sight behind the Sun.

Mulvaney did not wish, as the Second Mate had audibly wished when handing over the watch, that the ship was proceeding Earthwards. He had no close ties on the mother planet. Neither was he particularly interested in Mars, whose ruddy face, already with features clearly discernable, was showing in the periscope screen. There would come a time, he thought, when he would regard Mars as home, but that time was not yet. Shipboard romances do not always survive transition to a planetary surface and Anna had refused to entertain the idea of a marriage, solemnised by Captain Craig, before the landing at Port Gregory. " This," she had told him, " is a trial period, but the real trial period will begin when I start living with you ashore, away from your ship. I love you, Jim, and you love me, and I think that we shall go on that way, but I have to be sure. After all, this little world of the ship is so artificial . . ."

" No more so than the pressurised domes on Mars," he had said.

" But Mars is *my* world," she had insisted, " just as this ship is yours."

" I know Mars," he had stated. " I know Mars. I've been on this Martian Mail run for years now."

" But you've never *lived* on Mars. We don't know yet what sort of a Marsman you'll make."

*I shall make a good Marsman,* thought Mulvaney, staring at the planet that filled the periscope screen, the world towards which the ship was falling stern first, falling until such time as it would be necessary to activate her reaction drive for deceleration. *I shall make a good Marsman,* he told himself again. *I shan't be like some of the prospective colonists whom we carry out and then, after one or two trips, carry back again. I'm not all that devoted to Earth. I haven't much time for a planet whose people who have contrived to divide themselves into two armed camps and to carry on a cold war for well over a hundred years.*

*Still, I suppose that Earth is better than Venus, even though* they *have no cold war.*

He chuckled to himself. *And the funny part of it is that we're sailing under the Venusian flag in this wagon. You'd think that Martian Mail would buy the bitch outright, instead of keeping her all these years on Time Charter . . .*

He was lighting another cigarette when he became aware that someone had entered the control room. He turned in his chair, saw that it was Captain Craig. The shipmaster grunted a good morning and then, ignoring his Chief Officer, made a careful and detailed check of all the telltale instruments. Then, apparently satisfied, he went to the dispenser, the magnetic soles of his shoes making an unpleasant scraping noise on the steel deck, and drew himself a bulb of coffee. Tall, craggily angular, he looked down at his watch officer as he sipped the brew. He said, mildly reproving, " Don't you think that you might step up the air interchange unit while you're on watch, Mr. Mulvaney? After a dozen or so of those stinkweeds of yours you could cut the atmosphere in here with a knife."

Mulvaney said stiffly, " This is my watch, sir. And it has two hours yet to run."

Craig smiled with a hint of apology. He said, " I'm sorry, but I just had to find something wrong. But the air pressure is normal. There's nothing on the radar screens. The ship's on trajectory. And the Pile's not playing up . . ."

" What did you think was wrong, sir?" asked Mulvaney, more curious than hurt.

" I wish I knew, Mr. Mulvaney. But when you've been in command for some time you develop a sort of sixth sense. I woke up with the feeling that there was something somewhere, out of kilter." He sipped his coffee, then said, " You might get the Stewardess to clean out the dispenser ; this brew tastes as though it's had old socks boiled in it . . ."

" That's the way I like it," said Mulvaney, a grin robbing the words of any offense.

" Get it cleaned out, anyhow," said Craig—and then Mulvaney, watching him, wondered why a friendly argument about coffee should cause such an expression of fury to sweep over the Captain's face. He saw Craig's hand tighten on the plastic bulb, ducked to avoid the almost scalding stream that shot from the nipple. But it was not aimed at him, and neither was the shot that reverberated deafeningly in the confined

space. Mulvaney stared in horror at the blood pumping from the hole in the captain's chest, stared at the dead man who still stood there, his feet anchored by his magnetic shoes to the deck.

He turned slowly to look at the two men behind him, the two passengers, both of them holding heavy pistols and one of them using his free hand to wipe the coffee from his eyes.

The other one said, " Keep your hands away from those controls, Mister Mate. There has been too much shooting already."

" It was my fault," said Mulvaney bitterly. " I was too slow on the uptake. I should have slammed on full acceleration as they shot the Old Man."

" With cold tubes ?" queried Haskell, the Engineer. His fat face twisted in a rueful grin. " Just as well you didn't, Mulvaney. You'd have stood a good chance of scattering us over a million cubic miles of space."

" Even so, I could have done something . . ."

Anna Lasalle was silent but Mulvaney, looking at her, knew that she was feeling for him. There was pity in the expression of her finely featured face, in the grey eyes that regarded him gravely. But he did not want her pity.

Professor Galvin broke the uncomfortable silence. He said, in his high, almost squeaky voice, " Don't blame yourself, Mulvaney. All through history the pirate has enjoyed one great advantage over the law-abiding mariner. The pirate has always been ready and willing to employ violence, his victim has to be pushed into it." He adjusted the seat belt more comfortably about his skinny frame, contrived, even in Free Fall, to give himself—and the others—the illusion that he was leaning back in his chair. His goatee beard twitched enthusiastically as he talked, his eyes gleamed behind his spectacles. He was taking his hobby horse for a gallop and he was enjoying it. He went on, " When I embarked upon my major work, my *History of Piracy*, I little dreamed that I should be privileged to witness an act of piracy myself. The crime has been confined almost entirely to surface vessels on Earth's seas—although there have been one or two isolated instances on the oceans of Venus during the early days of the colonisation. Even so . . ."

" I still can't believe it," broke in Mulvaney. " Piracy, in this day and age . . ."

" Just look around you," growled Haskell.

Mulvaney looked around him, for perhaps the twentieth time since he had been herded, with crew members and passengers, into the Saloon. The compartment was crowded. There were the returning colonists, the prospective colonists, and those few Earthmen and women who were visiting Mars on business. There were the ship's own people—all of them except Captain Craig. Most of the chairs were occupied, and every occupant of a chair was securely strapped in. Standing at every entrance to the room were guards, and each guard carried, with a sort of vicious carelessness, a machine pistol. The guards had intimated that anybody who attempted to release himself from his chair would be dealt with.

Mulvaney looked at the guards. When they had boarded the ship at Port Woomera they had seemed to be ordinary enough passengers. He wondered how they had contrived to convey that impression. There was a hardness about them, a toughness that transcended mere physical toughness. Each of them was so deeply tanned as to seem almost Negroid. *Venusians*, thought Mulvaney. *But why . . ?*

" Of course," Galvin was droning on, " the main requisite to successful piracy is a base. Drake, when he harried the Spanish treasure fleets, had such a base in England. There, with the Queen's connivance—or co-operation—he could convert his loot into coin of the realm. The West Indian buccaneers had their island bases where they could refit their vessels although they depended, to a large extent, upon their victims for the necessities of life. And practically any fishing village along the China Coast served as a base for the Chinese pirates, whether they sallied out in their junks or, as our friends have done, boarded coastal steamers as passengers, rising to seize the ship at some prearranged signal.

" Now, this question of a base.

" Venus, of course, is out. Furthermore, I am of the opinion that the Venusian government will take a very dim view of this outrage, since this ship, *Venus Queen*, even though she is running for a Terran shipping company and is manned by Terran personnel, is of Venusian registry and ownership. Earth is out ; the ship is, after all, a unit of the merchant fleet of the Western Alliance—and the Eastern Alliance, of late, has been a staunch upholder of international and interplanetary law. Mars, as a member of the Western Alliance, is out, and so are

the Jovian satellites, which are governed by and from Moscow . . ."

" Quiet, there !" shouted one of the guards.

Galvin glared at the man, went on talking. " So this question of a base is still a moot point. " But," he raised a skinny forefinger in emphasis, " a base there must be . . ."

The guard slid across the deck in his magnetic shoes, poked the muzzle of his pistol into the scholar's belly. His eyes, under the bushy brows, over the bristling beard, were cold. " Quiet, I said."

Galvin subsided.

Mulvaney asked quietly, " Was that necessary ?"

" It was, Mister."

Mulvaney saw that another man had come into the Saloon. He recognised him. It was one of the two men who had broken into the control room. It was the man who had been blinded by the squirted coffee, who had fired the fatal shot.

He said, his voice cultured, well modulated, " Your attention please, ladies and gentlemen."

They met later in Anna's cabin—Anna, Mulvaney, Haskell and Professor Galvin. Mulvaney, in common with the rest of the ship's staff, was debarred from his own quarters, the entire forward section of the ship having been sealed off, as had been the after section with rocket motors and auxiliary machinery. Mulvaney was rather surprised that he had been allowed his freedom, but finally came to the conclusion that it is only in fiction that unarmed people can cope successfully with well-armed enemies, especially when the unarmed people are faced with the necessity of breaking down airtight doors before they can get at those same enemies.

" Legally speaking," said Galvin, " it now seems rather doubtful whether or not Perez and his men can be classed as pirates. They claim that they are political refugees from the dictatorship of General Francisco, and that their aim, their ultimate aim, is to liberate Venus. And as this ship is of Venusian ownership and registry, their claim would appear to have a certain validity. Given a ship of their own, and a base in the Asteroid Belt from which to operate they could stand some slight chance of success . . ."

" They asked me to help to set up the base," said Anna. " Every civil engineer, every technician among the passengers has been approached."

" And you refused, of course," said Mulvaney flatly.

" No, Jim, I didn't. I said that I'd consider it."

" Playing for time," he said.

" No. Not playing for time. I'm a Martian, but I have friends on Venus." Her face clouded. " I mean, I had friends on Venus. They weren't Reds. They were, I suppose, liberals. The last I heard of them, they'd been sent to the Cloud Country labour camp. And how many come alive out of that hell ?"

" Propaganda," he sneered. " Red propaganda. As long as Venus is on our side the balance of power in the Solar System is maintained. And as long as Venus is on our side the Eastern Alliance boys will be trying to drive a wedge between us."

" And what did Perez want to see *you* alone for ?" she asked coldly.

" He wants a qualified pilot and navigator. None of his men are spacemen." He paused. " I told him to go to hell. So did the Second and Third Mates."

" As far as I can judge," remarked Haskell softly, " he turned the ship on her gyroscopes quite nicely. As far as I can judge, we're on trajectory for the Belt right now."

" The question of fuel, began Galvin. " Or should I say propellant, or reaction mass . . .?"

" We've plenty," said Mulvaney gloomily. " We used a little to put us on the fresh trajectory, but what we shall use to make a landing on one of the asteroids are nothing like as much as what we should have used to land on Mars. Too, many of the asteroids are solid ice, so propellant can be replenished with ease. And as for stores—apart from luxuries the ship is a closed economy. We could proceed from here to Alpha Centauri, using and re-using the same air and water, eating the products of our yeast vats and algae tanks, feeding the yeasts and the algae on our own wastes."

" So you refused," said Anna Lasalle.

" Yes, I refused. I'm no politician. I'm a ship's officer whose ship has been pirated, and I shall be happy to see the pirates brought to justice." He turned to Galvin. " What did they do to pirates in the old days, Professor ? Weren't they hanged from the yardarm ? Wouldn't sending them out of the airlock without spacesuits be just as good ? Or better ?"

" Do you mean that ?" asked the girl.

" Yes, I mean it. After all, the swine murdered Captain Craig."

" It was an accident. He told me. The shock of that hot coffee in his face caused him to pull the trigger."

" That's what he says."

" Listen, Jim, Perez has tried to be humane. He even allowed Sparks to send out messages to our friends and relatives telling them that we were all safe."

" You're safe as long as it suits him," he growled.

The bulkhead speaker crackled, and then those in the cabin heard Perez' soft voice. He said, " Your attention, please. Your attention, please. I have learned that units of the fleet of the Western Alliance, based on Port Gregory, on Mars, have lifted in pursuit of this ship. There is, however, no danger. The warships will not fire on us so long as we have you on board. I regret that you have been forced into the position of hostages, but assure you that I shall endeavour to have you all transferred to one of the cruisers if it should be possible. That is all. Thank you."

" Propaganda," sneered Mulvaney.

Some days later, by the chronometer, they were sitting in the Saloon. Mulvaney wished that Galvin would go away. He wanted to be alone with Anna. He wanted to be able to convince her that he was not a jingoistic Earthman, as she had called him. He thought, ignoring the Professor's droning voice, *It's all very well for her. She's a colonial herself. She's bound to sympathise with the Venusian rebels. But, damn it all, they're pirates. The politics of it have no bearing on the matter whatsoever . . .*

" Essentially," Galvin was saying, " you're a pirate only if the high brass says that you are. For example, Captain Henry Morgan was a pirate. But Charles II, who got his rake-off from Morgan's loot, decided that he was a patriot, so Sir Henry was knighted and became Governor of Jamaica. Conversely, Captain Kidd was not a pirate. He had been commissioned as a privateer. And he was hanged not for piracy but for the murder of his carpenter, one William Moore, who was killed, as so many seamen were killed, for mutinous behaviour. Had it not been for the fact that the then Governor of New York was casting covetous and lustful eyes on Kidd's wife, it is extremely doubtful that Kidd would ever have been hanged. In more recent years, during the various world wars fought on Earth, the distinction between pirate and patriot was even more vague than that between pirate and privateer in the past. For

example, in the first of the world wars a certain Captain Fryatt, master of a merchant vessel, made a habit of attacking, by ramming, German submarines before they attacked him. He was decorated by his own side. He was tried and hanged, by the other side, for piracy when he was taken prisoner."

" So you don't think that Perez and his men are pirates ?" asked Anna.

" I don't, Miss Lasalle. But it's what the high brass says that counts."

" Legal quibbles," snorted Mulvaney. " Legal *and* ethical quibbles."

" What I don't like about you, Jim," Anna told him coldly, " is that you have a brain, of sorts, but no mind."

" Arrhh !" he snarled.

He unsnapped his belt, got to his feet, started to make his way out of the Saloon and towards the empty cabin into which he had moved. He stiffened as a voice blurted from the bulkhead speakers, " Will Mr. Mulvaney report to Control ? Will Mr. Mulvaney report to Control ?"

Perez was seated in the chair before the banked controls. His lean, intelligent face was worried. He said courteously, " Mr. Mulvaney, it was good of you to come."

" I just wanted to see what you swines are doing to 'my ship," growled Mulvaney.

" *Your* ship ? But I was forgetting. Legally speaking, you are Master now."

" Don't remind me of the circumstances," said Mulvaney clenching his fists. He heard the sharp clicks as the guards released the safety catches of their machine pistols. Studiously, he ignored the rebels, stared out of the forward ports. He felt a moment of panic as he realised that he was lost, that, to all intents and purposes the starry blackness ahead was an unmapped wilderness. He sneered at himself. Five minutes with his instruments and he would be able to establish the ship's position. Another ten minutes, and he'd have her heading back towards Mars.

" The news, of late, has been rather interesting," said Perez. " I have not seen fit to let it be broadcast over the public address system ; it is of such a nature that it would cause anxiety and, possibly, panic."

" What are you driving at ?" demanded Mulvaney.

Perez ignored the question, waved a hand towards the periscope screen. He said, " The pursuit progresses well. Too well." Mulvaney stared at the spot of light among the stars astern of the ship, the spot of light that obviously was not a star, that seemed to expand even as he watched, that was expanding. " I have been tempted," said Perez, " to squander reaction mass to accelerate, to build up speed. But even though I am not a spaceman I know that such a course of action would do more than delay the inevitable and, furthermore, would rob the ship of manoeuverability towards the end."

" What end ?"

Again Perez ignored the question, asked one of his own. " Tell me, Mr. Mulvaney, what manner of ship is that ? How can she maintain acceleration over such a long period ?"

" Acheson Drive," grunted Mulvaney. " The Navy has it, we don't. No rockets, just a constant thrust, one gravity, two, three—you name it. No propellant problems. Reactor pile, steam turbines to drive the generators, water cycled and recycled."

" How does it work ?"

" I don't know. If I did, I shouldn't be here."

" The news, Perez," said one of the guards.

" All right, Anselmo. Switch on."

The men listened to the emotionless voice of the announcer.

" The Western Alliance cruiser *John Paul Jones* reports that she is gaining rapidly on the pirate liner *Venus Queen*, which is believed to be making for the Asteroid Belt. A spokesman at Naval Headquarters has said that *John Paul Jones* will call upon *Venus Queen* to surrender, and should she not do so, force will be employed. Investigations made by the F.B.I. have indicated that practically all of *Venus Queen's* crew and passengers are members of various subversive organisations, or have been associated with them in the past, and are, therefore, willing accomplices of the rebel, Perez. In Venusburg today General Francisco, Premier of the Venus Free State, expressed his gratitude to the leaders of the Western Alliance for the prompt action taken by their naval forces . . ."

" Heard enough, Mulvaney ?" asked Perez, a sardonic lift to one thin eyebrow.

Mulvaney grinned. He said, " Our boys are on the ball, all right."

" But what about the force that's to be employed against this ship ? And what about the subversive organisation of which you're a member ?"

*The answer's obvious*, thought Mulvaney. *But I'm not telling you.*

" You think," said Perez, " that this is a bluff on the part of your government. You think that they won't shoot, but want to convince me that they will." He grinned whitely. " Well, Mulvaney, I am convinced. And I'm convinced that they aren't bluffing. The only bluff involved is the one that will lead the people to believe that the destruction of your ship, with all aboard, was a righteous act."

" Then surrender," said Mulvaney.

" Would you, in my shoes ?" countered Perez. " Damn it, man, there's more than your ship at stake, more than the lives of her people. There are the lives of every man, woman and child on Venus—and those are the lives that count so far as I'm concerned."

" She's coming up fast," announced one of the guards in an expressionless voice. The men looked into the periscopic screen, were able to make out details of the cruiser's construction. She was not sleekly beautiful, as were merchantmen, not designed for the aeronautical qualities necessary for rocket powered take-offs and landings in planetary atmospheres. She was no more than an ugly cylinder, whatever lines she may have had broken by the turrets and sponsons that protruded from her hull. She had never seen action, and never would so long as the uneasy peace between East and West persisted.

She had never seen action—yet.

A harsh, authorative voice crackled from the radio. "*John Paul Jones* to *Venus Queen*. *John Paul Jones* to *Venus Queen*. Open airlock and prepare for boarding party. Over."

Perez spoke into the microphone that one of his men handed him. " I hear you, *John Paul Jones*. This vessel is the property of the Venus Freedom State, and I deny your right to board and search."

" The Venus Free State has requested us . . ."

" The Venus Freedom State recognises the so-called Venus Free State only as an enemy."

" Open the airlock, or I shall open fire."

" Better open up," said Mulvaney. " There's always the chance that when he fires his warning torpedo he might hit us by mistake."

" You still think it would be a mistake ?" said Perez.

" Of course."

The warship was abeam of them now, huge, menacing. Mulvaney saw a flash of fire from one of the turrets—a flash of fire and a long streak of flame. Almost at once there was a brilliant explosion ahead of *Venus Queen* and well to one side of her trajectory.

" What did I tell you ?" said Mulvaney. " And they're being very careful. If that torp had burst ahead, the fragments would have riddled this control room . . ." He took a pair of binoculars and focussed them on the cruiser. He saw movement, saw a tube mounted in one of the turrets slowly swinging—a rocket launching tube. It was pointing directly at *Venus Queen's* control room. And, with velocities so well matched, there would be no deflection.

*You're a pirate*, the words ran through Mulvaney's brain, *when the high brass says that you are.* He grabbed Perez' shoulder, snapped, " Out !" He was dimly aware that the guards were closing on him, heard Perez say something to them. Then he was in the chair, and Perez himself was buckling the belt around him. He was in the chair, and his hand was slamming down on the auxiliary rocket controls. He felt the acceleration pressing him down into his seat and then, in the periscope screen, saw a dazzling burst of fire astern of the ship.

He cut the drive, then, and started the pumps that would begin the cycle of warming up the main venturi. He cut the drive, although his instinct was to run, and as far and as fast as possible. But he could not hope to outdistance the warship, and every ounce of reaction mass would be required for evasive action.

" What now, Captain ?" Perez was asking.

" Get on the intercom. Tell everybody to strap in. And keep a watch on those murderous devils out there ; let me know each time they fire—or before they fire . . ."

Mulvaney wondered—when he had time to wonder after the action—why it was that the cruiser had not used dirigible missiles. Later he worked it out for himself ; the action was no more than battle practice for *John Paul Jones*, and her Captain was making things as hard as possible for his Gunnery Officer. But it was rough enough while it lasted—rough on the nerves and rough on the body. There was the strain of trying to anticipate the enemy's gunnery, of the continual guesswork with the knowledge that one wrong guess would mean destruc-

tion. There was the physical strain occasioned by acceleration and deceleration, by the gut wrenching twisting as the ship corkscrewed to one side or the other of her trajectory.

Mulvaney had no time to wonder—but he had time to think. During a brief lull he told Perez to send his men to the cargo bins, to break out and to open the cases of tools that were, luckily, top stowage, and then to send two spacesuited rebels to the after airlock. From this vantage point they filled all space astern of the fleeing *Venus Queen* with an extempore minefield, a shoal of wrenches and spanners, hammers, chisels and micrometer gauges. A chilled steel tool, when you hit it at a speed well in excess of ten miles a second, is a lethal weapon.

Mulvaney had time to think, and after it was all over he had time to wonder, but he never found time to feel sorry for those in the cruiser. There must have been casualties, and heavy ones, in the warship. Freakishly the make-shift mines had penetrated her armour and had caused at least one magazine explosion. Or was it so freakish ? Had there been a neglect of proper precautions, armoured screens, an efficient radar watch, when dealing with an unarmed adversary ? But the Navy would have to look after its own—and he, Mulvaney, would look after his own.

His own ?

The ship, perhaps, and Anna, certainly, but . . .

He would work for Perez, and fight for him, if he had to, as he had done, but Venusian freedom meant very little to him. He would never be able to share Anna's idealism, although he would try to do so. He was just a spaceman, a competent master astronaut, content, until now to go about his lawful occasions with the minimum of fuss and bother.

He was the typical a-political man.

And he was a pirate, because the high brass had said that he was.

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